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A THING OF BEAUTY.

VOL. II.

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A THING OF BEAUTY.

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER,

AUTHOR OF

“HER PLIGHTED TROTH,” “GUARDIAN AND LOVER,”

“ONLY A FACE,”

&c., &c.

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever.”

KEATS.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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A THING OF BEAUTY.

CHAPTER I.

A FRIENDLY WARNING.

"Learn to hold thy tongue. Five words cost Zacharias forty weeks' silence."

FULLER.

"WHY did Keith introduce you to that woman?—what possible reason could he give you for doing so?"

"None at all," Val answers. "I did not ask him for a reason; he simply told me that he would like us to be acquainted, and I was perfectly willing."

"Pouf!" exclaims Mrs. Lyster, in the

tone of one who is not well satisfied ; “ and when he walked with you, did he go into the Hôtel de Portugal ? ”

“ No, not for a moment—in fact, he left us at the door.”

“ Where did he go then ? ”

“ I really did not observe.” And Val chafes at undergoing catechism number two within an hour.

“ Pouf ! ” cries Mrs. Lyster again ; and then she hobbles on in silence for a minute or two, while Val thinks regretfully of the pleasant group she left at the Redoute, and feels that she is not at all grateful to Mr. Fairfax for the diversion he has entailed on her this morning.

To be cross-questioned by Mrs. Middleton and Mrs. Lyster alternately is not half as agreeable as being complimented by Messrs. A B C of the *jeunesse dorée*. While she reflects in this wise, with a decided frown on

her white brow, Mrs. Lyster commences speaking in a sort of wheedling voice that is not common to her.

“My dear, besides your charming face, I can see that you have a great deal of shrewd sense; therefore I am going to talk to you much more unreservedly than I should otherwise think of doing to girls of your age. I should also like to talk without fear of interference, so let us turn in here.”

“Here” is a green path leading out of the Avenue Marteau, and going towards the *châlet*, but in a roundabout fashion. They turn, therefore, into the shade-arched winding walk, and follow it slowly through the *bosquets*, while a dim, delicious coolness comes to meet them as they seem to leave the noisy, bustling world behind.

Val thinks of the day when Ainsworth Harcourt was her companion in a sylvan stroll, and she envies one or two girls whom

they pass, sauntering with their attendant cavaliers. Finally Mrs. Lyster points to a seat, and they sit down, the glinting sunbeams and dappling shadows falling impartially on the sweet young face and the hard and wrinkled old one.

"I suppose," says Mrs. Lyster, settling herself on the bench as comfortably as she can, "that you have some idea of what I wish to talk about. So you will not be surprised if I begin by asking you to tell me frankly what you think of *that* woman—Mrs. Middleton, you know?"

"I really have not thought about the matter—it is so difficult to form a just opinion in one short interview, you see; but perhaps I may say that I am not very favourably impressed," Val replies reservedly.

"A-h! I fancied as much. You did not give me the impression that you were swear-

ing eternal friendship when you were conversing by that window." Might I ask, by-the-by, *what* she was whispering about?"

Val scents a pitfall. She does not consider that Mrs. Lyster has any right whatever to ask the question, and she draws herself up haughtily, and raises her little Greek nose just a shade above the level of her companion's.

"We were talking of different things—nothing very particular; and I fear I was not too amiable." Then she loses sight a moment of her reserve, and flashes out—"After all, it's none of my business that she jilted Mr. Fairfax; but I think it's *infamous* of women to behave so heartlessly as she appears to have done."

"Was *she* talking of Keith?"

"A little."

"And what about him?" pursues the in-

quisitor, so persistently that the pressed victim resigns the point.

"Nothing to speak of, if one analyses it. She asked me if I had known him very long, and whether I liked him, and what he had said of herself, and whether he was engaged to Miss Meredith, and—and—that is all, I believe."

Val stops, and tries to take breath. But Mrs. Lyster allows no breathing time.

"And what did you tell her about the engagement to Maude?" she questions eagerly, with her hawk-like eyes fixed on the mobile features before her. Again Val's dignity is aggressed, and she enunciates slowly and icily,

"What *could* I tell her, save that I knew nothing whatever about the matter?"

Mrs. Lyster does not waste much thought on Val's haughtiness, she only jerks out at once with an immensity of vehemence,

"I wish she had asked *me* the question! What earthly right has she to be meddling in Keith's affairs, after doing him all the harm she could do, and desiring to do him more! But some women are positively shameless. Now tell me one thing more, my dear; you are shrewd, as I said a moment ago, and I hope you will be equally frank. How did her manner to him, and his to her, strike you while you were with them?"

Val hesitates. The wrinkled face, with its keen glance, its hard features, its unlovely expression, is bent close to her; wonderfully repellent it is. Val thinks she looks just like a picture of the old witch that rode on a broomstick, that forms the frontispiece of one of St. Cecilia's toy-books, and Mrs. Lyster's audacity appears to be getting beyond bounds.

"I do not consider that I am in any way

obliged to answer such a question, Mrs. Lyster!" the girl exclaims passionately, "but lest you should misinterpret my silence, I must do so. Mr. Fairfax's manner to Mrs. Middleton struck me as very much what it might be to any ordinary acquaintance, while hers to him was perhaps a little constrained, and sometimes slightly deprecatory."

The two lynx eyes study her steadily.

"And did you perceive no signs of anything like a secret understanding between them?" the pair of thin lips ask impressively.

"None," cried Val, flushing brightly and feeling just a little ashamed.

"I beg your pardon for all these tiresome questions," says her companion; "they are disagreeable, I know, and would even be ill-bred, if they were not so important. But they are important, for it is essen-

tial that I should know exactly how Keith stands with regard to Mrs. Middleton; and if you choose, you can do me a very great favour, and an invaluable service for which you may rest assured I shall not be ungrateful."

"I, Mrs. Lyster?"

"Yes, *you*, my dear. Let me tell you one thing—I am as sure as I can be of anything which I do not absolutely know, that that woman, who, to gratify her vanity, kept Keith dangling in her train for years, and finally cruelly jilted him, is now desirous of fastening her chains once more upon him. Whether it is from a love of power, or whether she has still a fancy for him, as the world says, I do not know, neither do I know how likely she is to succeed. Most men are such fools—such insufferable fools! Arts which are as perfectly transparent as water, and disgusting in *our* sight, ensnare

the wisest amongst *them*. Now what I want you to do for me is simply to take advantage of the introduction which has been given you—to observe them when they are together, and to report to me the result.”

Val’s face glows crimson—glows with the offended pride of all the Egertons, a pride that lives stronger than any other passion in their breasts. She feels herself lowered, insulted, and clenches her tiny fist in impotent wrath against this hard, iron-featured creature of her own sex, from whom all delicacy of feeling, all sense of rectitude, seem to have gone out.

“Mrs. Lyster! Now how *can* you propose such an office to me? How can you think for one moment that I would ever condescend to make myself a *spy*—for that is what I should be, if I did what you wished—on people with whom I have no possible concern?”

Val pauses. Her conscience gives her a sharp twinge for not adhering strictly to veracity, since somehow she cannot disguise to herself that she *has* a concern in Keith Fairfax, and that she *hates* that Mrs. Middleton with a strong, unreasoning, dreadful hatred. But she does not pause long, on she goes at full gallop, anxious only to get over this distasteful *tête-à-tête*.

"It is impossible—*quite* impossible! Pray understand that at once. And I—I think I would rather not listen to any more!"

The hard old face seems to petrify, the voice comes measured and chilly.

"Do not be afraid. I shall not trouble you again. I am not in the habit of asking favours twice, I can assure you. And neither do I easily forget when they are refused. This appears to me to be a very slight favour, and one which might easily have been asked without evoking so much vehement and

virtuous indignation. It seems that I was mistaken, however. Your perceptions, no doubt, are much more refined than mine!" And upon her mouth rises an ugly sneer. "I beg your pardon again, and I will not refer to the subject again; let it be tabooed for ever. Shall we go towards the *châlet* now?"

In spite of her wicked projects and speeches, Mrs. Lyster *has* been kind to her in a way. So Val pleads, with a pretty earnestness that few people, even hardened ones, could resist,

"Please forgive me for speaking so hastily! And do not be vexed that I cannot act as you wish. I am very sorry!"

The old lady, who has risen from her seat, and is leaning on her crutch, glances at her and softens.

"You are absurd; but young people will be that, I suppose. And I have no desire

to interfere with your scruples. Do not suppose that I am angry with you. I will prove the contrary by giving you a warning which I may not have another such a good opportunity to deliver, and which is meant in sincere kindness. The warning is this—Don't let that Ainsworth Harcourt make a fool of you. Amuse yourself with him as much and as long as you like, lead him to any length you like without remorse; but don't forget, whatever he may say or insinuate, that he is only amusing himself with *you*. The only woman he can afford to marry is a woman who is rich as Cræsus. His sole business in life is to look for her. His sole pleasure in life is to turn other women's heads, and break their hearts, if they have any. He would be only too delighted to add you to the lengthy list of his victims. He bears the reputation of breaking hearts as proudly as the Red Indians

sport the scalps of their victims. Don't let him have the gratification of breaking *your* heart. Show him that there is one woman, at any rate, who is able to meet him at his own game, and I for one will hold you entitled to the thanks of our sex. Now give me your arm, forget, if you can, all the unpleasant things I have said, and let us move on. It grows chilly in the shade."

As they move on, Val not having made up her mind as to what answer she ought to give to Mrs. Lyster's advice, they suddenly fall upon an ambushed couple, who are delightfully ensconced in a green and shady nook, and both of whom start very visibly at the sight of them.

"Aunt, is it possible that this is you?" cries Miss Meredith, forgetting her ordinary languor and superciliousness in her astonishment, while Ainsworth Harcourt springs to

his feet, dropping his companion's parasol and gloves, with which he has been toying, on the ground.

"Yes, of course it is I," responds "Aunt," snappishly, and rather grimly, and she purses up her mouth in surprise. "Who else should it be? I don't suppose you know anyone else who looks like me, do you? Don't trouble yourself, Mr. Harcourt, I am not thinking of sitting down, and I did not come here in search of you. Miss Egerton and I are simply enjoying the exquisite beauties of nature. You are enjoying the beauties of something else. Don't let us disturb you on any account."

"We were just thinking of returning to the Rooms," says Maude Meredith, rising also. She knows the weather-gauge of her aunt's temper remarkably well, and just now prudence advises her that the temperature is

high, very high, approaching to "storm." Few people care to brave Mrs. Lyster. Of these few, her niece is certainly not one. At least, if she attempts to oppose her at all, it is with quiet obstinacy, and never with open defiance.

"What! are you really coming?" Mrs. Lyster asks. "There is really no necessity for you to do so; but if you *are*, I believe I must trouble you for your arm. I have been making a crutch of Miss Egerton long enough."

"Pray allow me to have the honour," Ainsworth Harcourt says softly, stepping forward quickly.

But the imperious old dame waves him aside.

"I am much obliged to you, but I prefer Maude. Her arm is of a good height, and suits me. She walks very well, too. *You* are too tall."

"Am I?" he laughs. "I am sorry for it!"

"Pouf! I don't mean as regards 'looks,'" she retorts. "You know that as well as I do. And no doubt very few people would
§§ object to the height of your arm—Miss Egerton, for instance."

"May I venture to ask you to try it?" he says, turning to Val, whose place as walking-stick Miss Meredith, with ill-concealed reluctance, has taken.

"There is no need," Val answers, with a smile. "I tried it last night at the ball, you know, and found it all that an arm should be!"

"I wish it was last night again," he murmurs, in a very low voice, looking at her with intense admiration. The words are absolutely nothing, the tone would befit the vows of Romeo. And as Val glances up at him with laughing eyes, she thinks that she

will follow Mrs Lyster's advice, and meet this man at his own game, if it is only to be quits with "Lady Clara."

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD, OLD TUNE.

“Passions, like seas, will have their ebbs and flows.”

LEE.

AS the days wear on, Mrs. Lyster's prophecy with regard to Val is more than fulfilled. On whatever grounds the success of the latter may be explained, it is certainly undoubted. Val is at present riding on the very crest of that wave of popular homage that makes a woman a *belle par excellence*. She is the recipient of enough admiration and attention to turn a score of feminine heads. Her bright *reparties* (and a great many of them have only a

flavour of flippancy) pass from lip to lip, and her bright glances are eagerly sought by the men who throng around, buzzing over her like flies over a saccharine morsel. She is queen of the hour, and although the next hour may depose her, and crown another sovereign—for nothing is more brief than this sort of reign—the girl is quite epicurean enough to enjoy her power as though it were going to last indefinitely.

Other women—women like Miss Meredith, for instance, with twice her style, and *savoir-faire*—are literally nowhere in the race for homage, and they look on in disgusted amazement, while they criticise her unsparingly, and tell her perverted admirers that there is really no beauty in the fire of the tawny eyes, no regularity in the exquisite Greek profile. Yet the admirers in question, blind and deaf to such remonstrances, buzz around her all the same, for

Val's arch face, with its bloom, its sparkle, its smile, and its tangle of russet hair, is one which has pleased the lordly fancy of man since the beginning.

Meanwhile, much has happened in these days—idle, balmy, August days—which seem to have dropped in perfection from the cloudless August sky—besides the fact of Val's social success. The great tide of well-dressed, *soigné* life has flowed back and forth between ball-room and promenade, gambling saloons and springs. The band has unceasingly blared forth Offenbach and Lecocq, varied occasionally by Strauss or the Brabançonne. People have come, and people have gone. Engagements have been entered into, and flirtations broken off; hearts have been wounded, and tears shed; dresses have been ruined, and jewels outshone.

And together with these events, it may be

recorded, in an especial paragraph to itself, Mrs. Lyster's temper has in no wise improved. She is worried, and "delights to bark and bite," for in truth "it is her nature too," and she grows as peevish as any infant cutting its first tooth.

Not any immediate prospect does she see of the matrimonial arrangement on which she has set her heart, or whatever with her serves for that organ. Maude Meredith and Keith act in the most provoking manner possible. The former bestows her sweetest smiles on any but the man whom her aunt has designated as the proper person to receive them. The latter spends the major part of his time among the hills or mountains, as they are called, with his sketch-book (most heartily does Mrs. Lyster detest the sight of that sketch-book), and the lesser part in lounging listlessly between the ch[^]alet and the Kursaal. Now and then he is to

be seen walking or talking with his old love, Mrs. Middleton, but this is rare. On other women he does not bestow much attention, and the only person who seems capable of rousing him to anything like animation is Val.

But Val has apparently very little time or interest to bestow on him. She treats him in an offhand fashion, and from breakfast until she leaves the Rooms at night she appears to be thoroughly engrossed by other men. So Keith, thinking naturally that these gay butterflies suit her better than his graver self, does not press his claims for notice, though in secret he suffers many a pang, which he attributes to hurt *amour propre*.

But Ainsworth Harcourt has no such retiring sentiments; he has no idea of surrendering to what he calls an unappreciative host the beautiful prize he has discovered, and he still continues to see more of her than

anyone else. In fact, one or two grumblers assert that he monopolises an undue share of her time, and wonder when and where the desperate flirtation will end.

Maude Meredith wonders the same thing, and says as much one afternoon in the large *salle*. They are dancing an impromptu cotillon, and she is floating round the room on Ainsworth Harcourt's arm.

She has been specially piqued and provoked at his very open and decided devotion to Miss Egerton during the last day or two, and this is the first opportunity she has had of calling him to account. In his usual fashion he leads up to the subject on which she is burning to speak.

"How very little I have seen of you lately!" he says, with a tender emphasis, as he clasps her just a shade closer. "If matters go on like this much longer, I shall feel inclined to challenge that man Vivyan

who has been monopolising you so much lately. How can you endure the fellow? He has not three ideas in his head. He is nothing to look at, and he dances like an animated poker."

"I never knew an Englishman who *could* dance," Miss Meredith remarks, a little maliciously, for she is quite aware that her partner plumes himself on his waltzing. "It is only Germans or French that have any notion of the accomplishment. You are mistaken, however, in your estimate of Mr. Vivyan's 'ideas.' He has more than three—six, perhaps, including the sensible one that I am very pretty and nice, and that Spa is an 'awfully jolly place.' But I am surprised that you should know who has been monopolising me—your own time and attention have been so very much engrossed by that delicious piece of rusticity, Miss Eger-ton. Your constancy to her is quite un-

paralleled. Pray, how much longer is it going to last?"

For all the ring of defiance and carelessness in her voice, Ainsworth Harcourt is far too great an efficient in the profession of "lady-killer," not to detect at once a certain little "tremolo" in the tone. So he answers very pathetically,

"How can I tell? One *must* do something to kill time in these places, you know. If I could but see more of you; but you tell me that is not possible!"

"I did not tell you that it was impossible for you to see *anything* of me, however," she flares out indignantly.

"No, you did not tell me that; but what with that dolt Vivyan, that little French jackanapes St. Pierre, and that woolly-haired, *Sauerkraut* eating German, to say nothing of Fairfax—"

"It is all nonsense," she interrupts coldly,

“and you know it as well as I do. Whatever a man desires to accomplish, he generally *can* accomplish. Miss Egerton has more attendants than I have (she is so dreadfully promiscuous in her choice, you know), and yet you contrive to see a great deal of her—so much, in fact, that folks are beginning to wonder if you are contemplating marrying her.”

“People are remarkably kind to take so much interest in my affairs,” he replies, nonchalantly, “but they might just as well wonder whether I am contemplating cutting my throat.”

And with this unsatisfactory explanation Maude Meredith is forced to be content.

If an impromptu cotillon is danced in the afternoon, the *salle* is always full of lookers-on—lookers-on who chatter, and laugh, and criticise the performers, and the curious evolutions of the passing Liégeois

and Vervierites, who are extremely well worth seeing; for Terpsichore herself might gnash her teeth at the caricature some of these votaries present.

On the present occasion, Keith Fairfax, hat in hand, forms one of the audience. He has, for a marvel, abandoned his mountain walk and pencils to-day, and is occupied in an animated conversation with a pretty, plump blonde, exquisitely attired, and gifted with brains; but even as he talks his eyes follow the gay figures flitting about the room. On which especial figure his eyes mostly rest it is difficult to tell; but when the plump blonde remarks with a womanly magnanimity which is rare, "How well Miss Egerton dances!" Keith Fairfax assents at once.

It is undoubtedly true that Val dances with extraordinary lightness and grace, and

with a poetry of motion that is all her own, though how she acquired the art to such perfection among the roses and cabbages is hard to understand. Her partner just now is a Monsieur De Lanoy, who supports her well, so well that half the eyes in the *salle* are bent on them. The handsome young Frenchman is charmed with her, and as he wheels her round, Keith, with another throb at his heart and a shadow on his forehead, sees him murmur something—only a compliment, probably—but whatever it is, it has the effect of deepening the rose-petal bloom on her cheeks, while she gives that peculiar swift upward glance which the famous La Récamier is said to have understood and practised so well.

But notwithstanding the innocence of floral and vegetable companionship, Val, like the said La Récamier, is a flirt to the back-

bone, and words and smiles and swift upward glances came as naturally to her as mother's milk.

Who can blame her, then, for things that are purely constitutional?

"What a terrible flirt that girl is!" says the plump blonde, in virtuous accents. "I really don't think there is anyone at Spa who quite equals her, yet I have heard that she is quite a novice, and comes from the jungles."

"Which fact goes a long way to prove that flirting is inherent in the feminine disposition, like original sin, and all that sort of thing," says Keith, forcing a faint laugh. "I fancy, however, that Miss Egerton *must* have had some training in the art before she dawned on us here. There are few places, even in the jungles, where it is not possible to find some subject on which to

try a maiden sword," he adds, with a touch of irony.

"Well, if it be so, I should feel a good deal of sorrow and sympathy for the subject, if he were here. How his poor soul would be harrowed and torn in twain! What do you suppose, now, that Frenchman, De Lanoy, said to her?—something very pleasant, I fancy, by the way her great black eyes answered him."

Again Keith's pulse beats faster, and his straight brows knit close together; but he makes a manly effort, and answers her quietly and indifferently enough—

Oh! the shams, the tricks of this wicked world, and the most painful of them—the smiling lip that hides an aching heart! It is but an acted lie; but we all do it—the best and the purest-minded human creature amongst us.

“ If the music had suddenly stopped, you might have had your curiosity gratified. Such accidents occur occasionally, like the heart-rending case of the man whom an unexpected pause in the music found in the middle of a sentence, and who was heard by everyone in the ball-room saying tenderly and pleadingly to his partner, ‘ Call me plain John.’ It is gratifying to know that the tender appeal was not unheeded ; from that time forth he was ‘ plain John ’ to all his friends and acquaintances.”

After a little more amusing and instructive conversation like this, Keith makes his bow and passes on. Before he has proceeded a couple of yards, however, a voice—a very familiar voice—speaks his name, and looking down at a row of seats, he sees Mrs. Middleton. She is alone, and there is a vacant chair by her side, which civility requires, or seems to require, that he should

take, and he does so accordingly, saying the while,

“This is something which I scarcely expected, to see you lapse of your own accord into the ranks of obligatory wall-flowers—you who, I remember, were so passionately fond of dancing. May I ask why you have given it up?”

“I have been forced to give up waltzing because Philip objects to it,” she says peevishly. “The *cotillon* is his especial abhorrence—for *me*; he likes it well enough for himself. But this is an old story with men; they wish to monopolise all the pleasant things.”

“Men cannot wish to monopolise waltzing,” Keith remarks, with a smile, “for with whom could they dance? We should not care to follow the advice of a popular bishop, and waltz with each other.”

“I never heard about any bishop’s ad-

vice on the matter," she remarks, indifferently.

"Didn't you? I thought everyone was *au fait* with the story. I will tell it you, for it amused me immensely when I first heard it," he goes on, possibly for the purpose of making conversation, since he has no desire whatever to drift into the forbidden memories which she keeps perpetually referring to.

"It seems the worthy prelate did not advocate waltzing among his flock. Probably he was of Byron's opinion, that the clasping promiscuously of waists and hands is not at any time a discreet pastime, so in anticipation of a grand garrison ball, he was waited on by two young K. D. G. cornets, who begged that he would withdraw his words, that were almost a restriction. They expatiated at very great length on the harmlessness and strict propriety of the abused

dance, venturing at last to hint that his lordship might change his opinion if he had ever witnessed it. The bishop acknowledged that this might be true, and begged that they would favour him with a specimen waltz. This they eagerly proceeded to do, fancying their point as good as gained. He gravely watching them as they circled round and round. Then when they paused, overheated and fairly out of breath, he said with an urbane smile,

“ ‘Gentlemen, I am satisfied. The dance is evidently charming, and you have my full permission to waltz as often and as long as you please—with each other.’ ”

Mrs. Middleton gives a languid smile. Apparently the picture of the two young red coats pirouetting round and round before the keen eyes of the amused bishop, appeals but faintly to her sense of humour. She returns again, after a minute, to the all-

absorbing subject of her own particular private grievances.

"Of course I am at liberty to dance quadrilles and Lancers," she says, "but as a rule I perfectly abominate them!"

"I confess that Mr. Middleton appears to be a little selfish," Keith observes, carelessly.

"Bah! men are always *that!*" she answers, with the faint bitter little laugh that by this time her companion has learnt to know. It is on his lips to ask,

"And how about women?" but he refrains.

So far he has succeeded pretty well in waving off allusions to words and looks and tones of that sealed past that lies between them. He has refrained, even with carefulness, from discussing any subject which might lead in any way to an allusion. He drops the question, then, of men and women's

"selfishness," and simply inquires if she is enjoying her stay at Spa. But she never loses an opportunity of reminding him *somehow* that once they two were all in all to one another, that years and events have not deadened the feeling on *her* side, whatever they may have done on his, and that she can never sustain a proper reserve towards him.

"Enjoying my stay!" she cries, arching her dark brows and turning up her eyes ceilingward, in an expression of surprise. "How could I enjoy it? Can I possibly expect to enjoy anything *now*?"

Perhaps her features say more than her words, for Keith involuntarily reddens, and his ears tingle with a hot sensation of annoyance and embarrassment. Why *will* this woman harp perpetually on the old, old tune, he wonders. "The light of other days" is a dear old song, but a repetition of

it, like everything else on the earth, waxes wearisome, especially when the sentiment has ceased to evoke an answering chord in the listener's breast. So Keith Fairfax quietly averts his flushed face, and seems apparently engrossed in watching the undulating movements of the pretty plump blonde who is dancing the *trois temps* with a heavy auburn-headed Herr.

After an instant, Mrs. Middleton, with a heightened colour mantling on her cheek as well, resumes her catalogue of troubles.

"You see, I am scarcely old enough yet to derive much lively gratification from sitting on a hard bench amongst a multitude of old women in turbans, or skinny, simpering wall-flowers; and yet if I were to follow the natural bent of youth and inclination—which would bid me be gay, and dance, walk, talk, and smile—these virtuous

critics would hold up their chaste palms in horror, and call me—‘fast!’”

“But surely there must be a happy medium between fastness and—and stupidity! as there is in most things,” he replies, feeling sincerely sorry for her—*but no more*. How could he be otherwise than sorry when he reads so much discontent in the wan, handsome face, and listens to so much bitterness in the impatient tones.

“What may be the happy medium—pray?” she asks, with a curl on her lip; “kettledrums and dinner-parties? I am afraid I am too *blasée* to find interest or amusement in any of these.”

There comes another short pause. Keith, as has been said, is really sorry for her; but somehow at this moment he is also conscious of being distinctly sorry for some one else, and that some one is Mr. Philip Middleton.

After all, did not this woman do him the best and greatest kindness in the world, when she quietly and deliberately jilted him?

Such a thought dawns upon him now — perhaps not for the first time either. Say that she had married him “all for love,” would not the poverty and the struggle that would then have been her lot in life, have proved as distasteful to her as the wealth for which she sold herself has been without the love that she resigned? Be this as it may, Keith Fairfax has for some time felt that the old, old magic is gone out of the face before him. He has listened in vain for the old, old thrill of romance in her voice; he has looked in vain for the old, old lustrous charm in the large dark eyes. It comes to him suddenly now with a strange acute force of realisation, that he—who has been so long in bondage—is now utterly,

completely free. He thinks, as he sits beside her now, without one throb the faster in his pulse, of the old, old days when, gazing into each other's eyes, he and Gertrude Heneage had felt as much alone, as entirely set apart as ever Adam and Eve were in that fair and fatal garden of Eden.

And now!—a verse caught from some poet rises in his mind, and *almost* babbles on his lips whether he will or not.

“ Could we be so now ?
Not if all 'neath Heaven's pall
Lay dead ; but I and thou
Could we be so now ! ”

Alas and alack-a-day for sentiment ! even this bit of poetry is knocked out of his head at one dash by a voice.

A voice so sweet, so fresh, so young—
sweeter, fresher, and younger than the
woman's who sits by his side, her hands
folded listlessly in her lap, the glamour of
her proximity fled.

"Oh! Mr. Fairfax," Val cries, half gaily, half regretfully, "see what a misfortune has befallen me! Is it not a pity? and I was so impatient to the poor, awkward, repentant man that did it!"

She holds up in her small lissome fingers, as she speaks, full two yards of filmy flouncing, torn ruthlessly from her trailing skirt. Several ladies near volunteer to pin up the damage that she may go on dancing, but she shakes her head with a laughing gesture.

"I can run home and change my dress in a few minutes," she avers. "One feels so untidy if one is only pinned together—no, thanks, Monsieur De Lanoy, I cannot think of allowing you to go with me; pray go back to the *cotillon*!"

"I will go with you," Keith says rising. "Where is your parasol, for the sun is very hot."

"I have not the slightest conception, but

please don't let me disturb you," and she can't restrain a certain petulance in her tone, and just the ghost of a frown as she notices that Mrs. Middleton is by him. Then, untutored child though she is, instinct bids her conceal her vexation before *that other woman's* eyes, and she adds,

"I should be glad of your escort, Mr. Fairfax, but surely one may be allowed to go to one's house alone—in the daytime?"

"Oh, certainly one may be allowed to do so, if it comes to a question of *that!*" he answers smiling, "but you are not disturbing me, and therefore—may I see you as far as the chalet?"

She does not say "yes," but she looks up at him, and in another minute they walk away together, watched intently, nay bitterly, perhaps, by the jealous, haggard eyes of Keith's old love. Still who will pity her? Like the dog in the fable, she deserted sub-

stance for shadow, for is not wealth, compared with real love, but a shadow? And now she would give all she possesses in the wide world to be the fair, tocherless maiden who holds Keith's fancy in thrall. Not his *heart*, Mrs. Middleton does not believe that the case is so bad as that; and she lays the flattering unction to her soul that the young, fresh beauty Miss Egerton owns will prove but an ephemeral attraction to the man whom, with a burning shame on her cheek, she confessed to herself that she still loved—loved foolishly, wickedly, but with all her heart.

CHAPTER III.

“A CHOKING GALL AND A PRESERVING SWEET.”

“Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
Th’ uncertain glory of an April day,
Which now shows all the beauty of the sun,
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away.”

SHAKESPEARE.

JUST for once in a way, Val dons her attire quickly. Usually her toilette is a labour of time as well as a labour of love, and aware of this, Keith Fairfax throws himself into an easy-chair, and prepares to wait. Presently he falls into a brown study, and if thoughts are to be guessed at by facial expression, assuredly his thoughts are neither cheerful nor pleasant. His mou-

stache droops over a pair of compressed lips, and there is a harassed, unhappy look in his eyes.

He has a desideratum in life, and he does not know how to reach it.

Now this is an ordinary case enough amongst mankind, but this fact does not tend to making things less perplexing and harrowing. Now and then, while he ponders, a light step in an inner room makes the red blood fly to his cheek, and his pulse beat faster; whereupon he bites his nether lip hard, and scorns himself for having, at the ripe age of twenty-eight, succumbed to a hopeless and absurd passion.

The latter days have slowly lagged on their course, crawling snail-wise, as he has vainly attempted to distract himself with sketching and reading. During the whole time he has been perpetually haunted by a girl's face—"Val's face,"—for already, after

the fashion of lovers, he has begun to call her "Val" to himself. It does not in the least signify what subject he sketches, or what interesting matter he studies, a vision stands ever beside him, with tawny eyes flashing bewilderingly into his own.

So now, a little hopeless, and altogether helpless, he tries to argue sapiently with himself, forgetting that

"We paint love as a child,
When he should sit a giant on the clouds,
The great disturbing spirit in the world."

"Keith, old fellow," he says, "can it be possible that any amount of sense you flatter yourself you possess has been dispersed to the four winds by a pretty face?—the face, too, of a girl of whom you know nothing—understand nothing? *Cui bono?* this insane passion, or infatuation, whatever it is—this pursuit of a will-o'-the-wisp! Marriage, that usual ultimate object of feelings such as you

are indulging in, would be simply *madness*. Shake yourself up; *don't* be such an egregious fool! Descend from the region of shadowy romance; return to matter of fact, healthy life, and forget——”

The door bursts open, and the haunting face he is trying to chase out of his mind stands before him. Val flashes into the room—flashes (I use the word advisedly) in like a blaze of sunshine, a sudden breeze; ribbons fluttering, russet hair flying, black eyes gleaming.

And Keith Fairfax, like many another of his sex, bereft of his fictitious strength, remains a weak sapling in a woman's presence, ready to be bent, or even broken, at her slightest caprice.

Oh, Eve, Eve, how well you have revenged yourself! Once tempted, 'tis true, but since, from generation to generation, always the tempter! Of Val's costume

before, Keith retains only a vague idea of fleecy blush-rose pink; but now his artistic gaze takes in every little detail, and he confesses that her attire is perfect and harmonious. Yet the material is simple enough. Just a short cambric skirt of striped blue and white, giving a glimpse of a slender ankle and a tiny foot; an overdress of deeper blue, cut square on the white bosom, and with flowing Circassian sleeves, that show the fair arms and dimpled wrists; a little straw hat, with a mixed bunch of blue corn-flower, a sheaf of yellow wheatear, a vivid poppy perches lightly on the clustering hair; a pair of eyes, odalisque in softness, a pair of lips like glowing rosebuds, a pink deeper than usual on the delicate cheeks.

Picturesquely, the effect could not be improved, and all the tints of face and dress are so clear that any painter might be

tempted to make a study in colour of her as she stands.

Keith almost forgets his feelings towards the girl in his devotion to his art; he longs to sketch her, to perpetuate on canvas the beauty that lives and is engraved on his heart.

"Are you very anxious to go back to the Rooms?" he inquires, somewhat to her surprise, but not to her annoyance, be it known, for Val likes to be alone with him, though she would not, for all the world, let him guess it. "Don't you think you could spare me the moments you have promised to De Lanoy? Perhaps it is selfish of me to ask such a thing, but I would give a good deal for a picture of you in that dress, and I should like to commence it at once."

Val blushes prettily, and she cannot control a well-pleased little smile stealing over her mouth. The diffidence with which he

prefers his request is very unnecessary. Being sketched is a greater novelty than dancing the *cotillon*, and therefore she prefers it. Like all her sex, novelty is *the* most charming thing to her.

“Are you really in earnest?” she asks, a little sceptically. “I am not looking particularly well, and this dress is not very remarkable. You know we Egertons are paupers, and can’t afford things at Worth’s, so my little mother and I concocted it, and Lisette’s nose went up ethereally at it just now. But if you really mean what you say, I am quite at your service. I do not at all care about finishing the *cotillon*, and as for Monsieur De Lanoy, he is very nice, but I daresay he’ll keep. But am I *really* worth sketching?” she goes on, demurely.

Keith looks at her a minute steadily in silence. Is she worth sketching? Good heavens! And here one little glance at her

makes him feel dizzy, and "nohow!" All he remembers is that his eyes have never feasted so luxuriously before. Perhaps *they* tell her so, for down droop the broad lids, and the saucy face looks shy.

"Thank you very much for granting my request," he says earnestly. "I'll get my colour-box, and then we'll go—*will* you go?—out into the woods. I can work better in the open air. In fact, I should be so paralysed here by a fear of interruption, that I could do nothing creditable."

"Let us go, by all means," cries Val. "I should like it immensely."

So Keith equips himself with his sketch-book and his colour-box, and they set forth. Avoiding the regulation walks, they take a path leading up the hill, a wild, sweet path, which has plainly never had any connection with fashion, nor made acquaintance with sociable human beings, for it scarcely admits

of two people walking abreast. It leads them, in a very zig-zag fashion, along a deeply-shaded ravine, where Val is in real and mortal terror of adders and earwigs, and all sorts of hideous creeping things, over a narrow, clear streamlet, across a tiny valley, by the base of a verdure-clad hill, and into a dell so fair, so green, so still, that it might serve as a bivouac for Titania and her miniature court.

The streamlet which has borne them company all the way, murmuring softly in gladness the while, under its fringe of laurel and fern, tumbles here and there into a Lilliputian cascade, with a music of falling water which breaks the woodland silence, and then it spreads out into a glassy pool, around which are grey rocks, covered with clinging moss, baby lichens, and all manner of delicate parasites. Tall trees throw their long leafy arms across in a strong embrace, through

which the sunbeams dance and quiver, and touch, in bars and circles of light, the face of the crystal water.

Around are hills, draped with foliage, and there is not a single sound save the gentle, amorous cooing of doves amongst the tangled branches, and the inarticulate murmur of which woods are always full—the throb! throb! as it were, of Nature's great big heart.

Val throws herself with an exclamation of delight on a tempting mossy bank by the side of the glassy pool.

“How pretty!” she cries, in her childish way—“oh! how pretty! Why, this is a thousand times nicer than that Artist's Walk!”

“Yes,” says Keith, sitting down opposite to her, and heaving a sigh of intense satisfaction, although he perches on an irregular ledge of rock; “*I* think it infinitely nicer.

There are no fashioned rambles with rustic seats for ordinary whispering lovers about here. I thought you would like it, if you could stand the long walk."

"Stand the walk!" she says, indignantly. "Why, I have been accustomed to walk twice, nay, thrice the distance again and again, and think nothing of it. Plant and Jack used to take me miles when they went on their fishing excursions. Let me tell you, sir, that I am a born and bred country lass, and that it would take more than a few weeks at Spa to make an indolent, fine lady of me."

"I hope so, I am sure," he replies, opening his sketch-book, and beginning lazily to sharpen a pencil. After all he does not commence labour very energetically, and it will require a great number of sittings before the completion of the portrait. "I cannot help thinking, however, that you are

in a fair way to attain that unenviable result," he adds, deprecatingly.

"Is it possible that you think so? I should have imagined that was the very last thing anybody could prognosticate with regard to me. Now, Mr. Harcourt always tells me that my greatest charm in his eyes is being so thoroughly unlike what he calls society Misses."

"And how long do you suppose you will retain your dissimilarity, with Ainsworth Harcourt and Co. to flatter you and flutter round you from morning till night, and teach you all the tricks and fashions of their class?"

"I am sure I don't know. I have not thought about the matter. Is there any necessity to do so? I only trust I shall not be utterly spoiled by the time I get home again."

Val says this so naïvely that Keith Fair-

fax smiles in spite of himself as he looks at her. The yellow glistening sunshine forms an aureole above her head, the snowdrop of a hand toys with the spiked blades of grass, a more serious expression has crept over the sparkling face, and the large black eyes rest dreamily on the water. As she so sits, her back against the trunk of a silver-beech, the crystal streamlet beside her, she makes a picture which he feels that no suggestion of his can add to or improve, and so he falls at once to sketching rapidly. It is quite possible, however, to draw and talk at the same moment, as he proves.

"May I ask if there is any danger of your being utterly spoiled before you go home?" he asks.

"There is great danger of it," she answers, still gazing down into the pool, and with unmistakeable sincerity in her tone. "You must surely see that as plainly as I do!

After having been admired and envied, and made to feel myself quite a person of consequence, how shall I drop back with even tolerable philosophy into the life which seemed to me so dreadfully dull and flat, even when I knew no other. It will be hard—*hard!*"

"It *will* be very hard, certainly," echoes Keith, with all his heart. Just at this minute he is trying to transfer to his page the sweet lines and curves of the downcast face, and it strikes him very forcibly that such a face deserves a better fate than the dull flat life which she so honestly deplores.

Mighty and extraordinary is the power of loveliness over the sympathy as well as the heart of man! Had Val, peradventure, belonged to that large and often very estimable class of plain young ladies, with which this world abounds, she would not only have made no sensation at Spa, and

passed without the doubtful honour of Ainsworth Harcourt's notice, but Keith Fairfax would have wasted no regret on the briefness of her reign as Queen of Beauty, or the absolute necessity of her return to the stagnant routine of country life.

"Yes, indeed, it will be uncommonly hard," she says, in her quick, outspoken way, and she gives a little impatient sigh, "but it *must* be done, and therefore I hope I shall not be quite spoiled. I should not like to go back and be so peevish and discontented that I should make my little mother and the rest of them all wretched, especially Jack!"

"Might I be allowed to ask who 'Jack' is? Your brother?"

Val laughs, a little low, rippling laugh, which for the first time jars on the listener's ear, and for the first time also, since they have been conversing, she lifts up her big

gleaming eyes, and fixes them full upon him.

"No," she replies, with the most delicious candour, "Jack is not my brother, but the man to whom I am engaged, after a fashion."

Keith grows white, white to the lips, he stops sketching, and the pencil drops from his fingers.

"Are you in earnest?" he questions gravely, with a visible tremble in his voice. "Do you mean to say that your parents have allowed a child like you, with no knowledge of society, no experience at all of the world, to go and engage yourself?"

"Child, indeed!" she cries, with an offended flush. "I shall be eighteen next December, and my little mother was *married* before she reached that age. As for Jack, I have known him all my life, and treated him very, very badly too, poor dear old fellow!"

"Do you consider engaging yourself to him in the light of treating him very badly?"

"You don't understand. It's a long story. I should have to tell you all about it to make you understand it properly, and perhaps it would not interest you."

"On the contrary, it would interest me very much," he brings himself to utter calmly, although inwardly there is a civil war of heart and soul that is supreme torture to support. "If you have not yet learned that everything about you interests me—almost more, I fancy, than it can interest Mr. Harcourt—you have far less of discernment than your sex usually possess."

"Yes, I think you *do* feel a sort of interest in me," she replies demurely. "I suppose it's on account of papa's friendship with your father."

"Just that," he answers, a little dryly.

He cannot laugh; he is sore within—so

sore that, if he were but a woman, he would avail himself of that wonderful panacea for grief that women have—a flood of copious tears. But he is a man. So his eyeballs burn with repressed drops, and lumps of ice seem to be trickling over his heart. He must not, however, give way, so, like a parrot, he talks on.

“Yes, friendship ought to be hereditary, as I told you that first day in Brussels. *Do you remember that day?*” he asks slowly, looking up at her.

He sees she does in the vivid crimson that dyes her face, in the swift lower of the long lashes, in the nervous twitch of the snow-drop hand.

“Miss Egerton, you may speak to me frankly; and I will advise you, if you wish, to the very best of my ability for your good.”

“I don’t exactly know where to begin,”

she says, meditatively, leaning a little forward, and gazing at the reflection of herself in the clear water, while Keith watches her keenly, his breath almost stayed, but his heart beating fast.

CHAPTER IV.

DO YOU LOVE HIM ?

“ Love?—I will tell thee what it is to love :

It is to build with human thoughts a shrine,
Where hope sits brooding like a beauteous dove,
Where life seems young, and like a thing divine ;
All tastes, all pleasures, all desires combine

To consecrate this sanctuary of bliss.
Above, the stars in cloudless beauty shine ;

Around, the streams their flowery margin kiss—
And if there's Heaven on Earth, that Heaven is surely
this !”

“ **B**EGIN with Mr.—Jack,” suggests
Keith at last. “ Do you ”—here he
begins drawing various geometrical-looking
figures on the edge of his paper—“ do you
—*love him ?*”

"Love him?—why—why, of *course* I do!" cries Val, colouring up again as red as a rose over brow and neck.

Then she pauses abruptly, and the rosi-ness deepens and deepens, until she can see it even in the water, for at that moment certain words occur to her, as if a malicious little elf whispered them in her ear—

"Unless you can think, when the song is done,
No other is soft in the rhythm;
Unless you can feel, when left by one,
That all men else go with him;
Unless you know, when unpraised by his breath,
That your beauty itself wants proving;
Unless you can swear for life, for death—
Oh, fear to call it 'loving!'"

Has she ever—ever at any time—felt any of this for Jack? With the best intentions in the world, she is forced to return a reluctant negative to herself. The impulse of truth, which is her strongest point, therefore prompts her to a lame amendment.

"That is, that I have known Jack always,

and cared for him as—as I care for Plant.”

“Ah!” exclaims her companion, as though very much relieved, and his face decidedly brightens up several shades. “The next point is, are you absolutely engaged to him?”

“Well, not *absolutely*, perhaps, only conditionally. You see, I felt that I had treated him so badly, flirted with him, leading him on to think that I cared for him, and I was so ungrateful for all his affection, and all the while he was so good and patient that I could not help promising him, the very last ride we had, that I would marry him if—really I am half ashamed to tell you such nonsense,” she breaks off, looking up at him shyly, and laughing nervously.

“*Don’t* be ashamed to tell me *anything*,” he says earnestly. “What condition did you stipulate?”

"That I would marry him if I did not meet anyone in the course of my travels whom I liked better."

"Mr. Jack must be of a remarkably obliging disposition, or else very, very much in love to accept such terms. And—and forgive me if I am impertinent, but the spirit of hereditary friendship is very strong within me just now—and you have not met *anyone* whom you like better?"

"Not anyone."

"*No one!*" He whispers it almost in the effort to speak calmly. But how he longs—*longs* to seize her in his strong arms and ask that question upon her lips, her sweet red lips, the one touch of which seems to be thrilling him still. He would give, he feels, ten years of his life if he could again

"Waste his whole soul in one kiss
Upon those perfect lips."

Common sense deters him from even uttering the words that burn on his mouth; and yet, though he has never told her that he loves her, loves her madly, wildly, loves her to fatuous stupidity, he is wroth at the stab that she gives him in her reply—

“No,” she says, “not anyone. I have seen so many people, I have had so very much new to think of, that there has not been time or chance for any *one* impression.”

Her lids effectually cover what there might be of tell-tale in her eyes, so he is forced to accept her assertion.

“Not even Harcourt?” he asks brokenly.

“Why should you think such a thing as *that?*” she flares out impetuously, sitting bolt upright now, and flashing indignation at him—“why, on earth should you ask me *that?*”

“Not from anything that I have seen in

you," he replies deprecatingly. It pains him that she should look at him hardly or angrily. He likes to remember her always with that soft odalisque glance that he has met—not often, it is true—but still now and then. "But simply because the man has chosen to distinguish you by attentions such as he never pays to any woman without intending to turn her head, or win her heart. Women of greater age and experience than yours have failed utterly in resisting his acknowledged fascinations. Ainsworth Harcourt is undeniably a handsome man, too. Could I help wondering if you would be able to resist him?"

This in a weary, despondent voice, that strikes her at once. She looks at him covertly. Inwardly she softens, divining that *this* man likes her, and yet, for some reason, does not tell her so. Still it is a pleasant sort of incense to know that he

feels, even if he does not speak ; and she says, in a little, humble voice—

“No doubt I have given you cause to wonder—no doubt a good many people have written me down as one of the victims to Mr. Harcourt’s fascinations ; but you are all mistaken. Besides being rather amused and flattered by him, I have had a reason, which—which I confess I should not like to own to you, for encouraging his attentions. I knew I could not break his heart, and my own was not in danger—for, honestly, he rather wearies me. I suppose I am guilty of bad taste, but, nevertheless, it *is* so. He is not an intellectual man ; and I—though I do not at all pretend to be an intellectual woman—I do like a man to pay me the compliment of talking sense to me sometimes. He never does. I suppose he imagines it is quite unnecessary.”

“Harcourt is not by any means a fool,”

remarks Keith, feeling magnanimous now that his mind is a little at rest on this score. "He is not in reality a mere empty-headed flirting-machine—that is to say, he has plenty of sense, but he finds nonsense answers much better with the majority of women he comes across; and he regards them possibly in the abstract, and not in the concrete. But we have wandered rather far from Mr. —Jack. Suppose we return to him. By-the-by,

‘Who was his father?—who was his mother?
Has he a sister?—has he a brother?’

What is his name? I fancy he has one?"

Val will not stand laughter or irony, evidently, when "Mr. Jack" is concerned. Her mouth curls slightly, and she picks up a shining pebble, and flings it into the pool as she says—

"His name is John Rivers. His father and mother are dead, poor fellow! He has

no brothers or sisters, or uncles or aunts, and those sort of people" (she lays a stress on the "aunts"). "And, in answer to the rest of your verse—

‘Or is there a dearer one still,
Or a nearer one yet than all other?’

I may say, without vanity, *Yes.*"

A pause. More in sorrow than in anger he marks, learns, and inwardly digests her rebuke. Woman-like, she has hit him hard. Presently he speaks with impressive gravity.

"May I really give you my advice on this matter, Miss Egerton?"

"Of course you may."

"Then my serious advice to you is, not to marry John Rivers, unless your feelings towards him change very much. You have not the slightest conception," he goes on, with increasing warmth, "what it would be to tie all your youth and beauty, and, above all, your heart, in the bondage of a

loveless marriage. Nothing on earth is more criminal or more degrading."

"Do you think so?" she questions, looking at him earnestly.

"I do not think so, but I *know* so," he answers emphatically. "Scores upon scores of women around you are making, have made, and will make such marriages, but they are none the less criminal and degrading. And is the end of it happiness? If so, I have yet to see the first instance of it. Look! we are all alone, there is no one to listen, and we are talking candidly; look at that poor woman to whom I introduced you—Mrs. Middleton! She made what all the world called a brilliant match. She married a man who was young, good-looking, wealthy, and very much in love with her, but she cared absolutely nothing about him. And the consequence is that they are both as wretched as they can be, both chafing use-

lessly against the galling chains in which they have bound themselves."

"She was engaged to you, was she not?" Val asks, very much interested, and quite unconscious of the exceedingly home question she puts.

"Yes," he answers, in a very low tone, looking down at the ground. He is a little abashed, perhaps, to own to this girl, whom he loves with a love far surpassing any love that has come to him before, that he has cared for another woman, and that that woman flung him away for mere greed of gold. "She was engaged to me for years. She was engaged to me, in fact, when she went to the altar, for she did not even pay me the compliment of breaking off the engagement before she married Philip Middleton. But then, you see, I was very poor. Her father had sounded my aunt, and learnt that unless I married to please the latter,

she would cut me off with a shilling!"

"And did she—that cruel, heartless woman, I mean—never explain to you why she acted so shamefully?"

"What explanation was needed? The fact explained itself. She married Middleton because he was rich, and now that she finds scant happiness in the silks and laces and jewels for which she bartered herself, she would not object to a little Platonic sympathy from me. So much self-respect have some women!"

"How can you ever address a syllable to her?" Val exclaims indignantly, and, somehow, though she knows there is a leaven of spite in it, she wishes that Mrs. Middleton could hear the scorn in her old lover's voice. Looking down into the water once more, she says, reflectively, "I think Mrs. Middleton is a very unhappy woman; but do you know I cannot be Christianly sorry for her."

How could she make a marriage in which there was never any love?"

"Do not expect anyone to be sorry for you, then, when you become Mrs. John Rivers."

Val blushes hotly.

"Comparisons are odious, always odious," she cries. "You don't know Jack. You don't understand. He is as kind and good as a man can be. Any woman might be able to love him."

Keith winces.

"But however miserable I might be wicked enough to feel if I married him, you may be sure I would never ask anyone for sympathy, Platonic or otherwise!" she adds vehemently.

"God grant that you may never feel the want of it!" he murmurs softly, gazing at her with adoring eyes. "And, in order that you never may, do not marry out of pity or

out of kindness, any more than for money. You sacrifice yourself, it is true, for a higher motive, but still it remains a sacrifice. I wish I could believe that my poor words would influence you in this."

"And why should they?" she asks scornfully, while, unknown to her, an incipient jealousy gnaws her own heart. "Preachers, to be heeded, should practise what they preach. Yours is the doctrine of following the light, and not the lantern. Now, are not *you* going to make what is called a marriage of interest?"

She is just a little frightened at her own temerity in asking this question, when she marks the swift ashy pallor that sweeps over his cheek; but then she recollects how he has cross-questioned her, and, after all, they are both in the same box. If she is to marry Jack, he is to marry Maude Meredith, so what right has he to advise her? No

right, not a single right, and apparently he too recognizes this unhappy fact. At least, his pallor goes, and he flushes a deep and painful flush for a man. He hesitates a moment before he answers, and then he says, in a constrained voice,

“I scarcely think that I am, but even if it were so, there are what lawyers would call a number of extenuating circumstances in my case. I am hovering on the brink of an uncertainty, however, but in a few days I shall have decided one way or the other. Then, in return for your frankness to me this morning, I may ask you to listen to a short explanation of my conduct. There are not many people in the world for whose good or evil opinion I care, but I *do* care for yours, only on the ground of hereditary friendship, I suppose!”

And he smiles. But though he smiles, his eyes are sorrowful, and Val, not exactly

knowing what reply to give, turns the conversation.

"Have you finished my picture? I want to see myself, and I think it must be getting very late."

He laughs, and holds up the sketch—an outline of a face, a mere suggestion of a figure, a tree, and a rock, this is all.

"You see it is not finished," he says. "I have been talking instead of working. You must be good enough to give me another sitting, and we will converse of nothing interesting or exciting. I want a sketch of you in colours, and I *must* have it. I cannot let your face pass absolutely out of my life, and I detest a photograph."

"I shall be very glad to give you as many sittings as you like, but now we must be gone."

He reluctantly admits that civilization, in the shape of the dinner-hour, has claims on

them, so they say farewell to the dell, and with many plans for returning thither, pass slowly away.

CHAPTER V.

MY LADY COQUETTE.

"I do confess thou'rt sweet, but find
 Thee such an unthrift of thy sweets—
 Thy favours are but like the wind,
 That kisseth everything it meets.

.
 The morning rose that untouched stands,
 Arm'd with its briers, how sweet it smiles,
 But plucked and strained by ruder hands,
 Its sweet no longer with it dwells!"

HERRICK.

IT happens that Val sees a good deal of
 Keith Fairfax during these days, much
 to the disappointment and disgust of her
 host of admirers, for this seeing does not
 take place at the Kursaal or on the

promenade, where another man can at any moment claim half of her attention, but out among the hills and woods, where the sketch (now rapidly approaching completion) was begun.

Besides this animadverting host already mentioned, nobody else pays very much attention to her movements. The philosopher is still immersed in the solution of what species he really belongs to ; and Mrs. Lyster, although she decidedly objects, on principle, to anything savouring of artistic vagabondage, is willing to tolerate sketching and rambling as a lesser evil than Mrs. Middleton's society ; and besides this, her nephew's *tête-à-têtes* with Val cause her no concern whatever. The girl is a lovely, bright little thing, just the companion to make a Summer afternoon's loitering pleasant, but the shrewd old woman thinks she knows the world well, and that men without

a fortune at their back do not as a rule (unless they are lunatics) marry the prettiest and brightest of little things, when they have only their prettiness and brightness for a dower.

Moreover, Mrs. Lyster, who is impregnated with a good deal of stubbornness, clings persistently still to a belief in Keith's hopeless and undying passion for his old love—the woman whom she can never meet or mention without hurling at her a shaft, well venomed. According to her ideas, there is danger in the woman, deadly, desperate danger, of an infatuation without any definite end, while Val's extreme youthfulness and beauty can—with a moderately sensible man—only serve to amuse and pass away an idle hour. She sees that the philosopher is too much absorbed in whist, in startling theories, newspapers, speculative discourse, and last, not least, in himself, to

trouble about his daughter; yet she never holds out a friendly warning finger to the girl, nay, almost child, who is left so strangely to her own occupations and amusements.

These occupations and amusements Maude Meredith regards with supercilious indifference, and a certain sense of relief, which she hardly acknowledges to herself. She informs her aunt (who receives the information with a sceptical smile, and just the amount of credulity due to it) that Val has taken to this desperate flirtation with Keith for the sole reason that Ainsworth Harcourt has dropped her, but in her heart she knows better—she knows that so far from having “dropped her,” Ainsworth Harcourt is intensely annoyed and piqued at the new interest that Miss Egerton has developed, even while the recipient of his august notice and devotion. And thus this little comedy

stands on one bright golden morning, when the different *dramatis personæ* are grouped under a big spreading tree in the Promenade de Quatres Heures.

Already Phœbus is driving his car through the sky, and the heat is intolerable, but in this especial spot there are soft shades, green grass, and a delicious breeze. All down the promenade similar groups are scattered, and in front of Baas Coge people swarm like flies over glasses of iced sorbet and seltzer. It is the height of the season, and Ainsworth Harcourt announces languidly that if the crowd in this "little hotbed" does not lessen, he will be driven away.

"Man is a wonderfully gregarious animal," he lisps, "but my gregariousness is not developed to the extent of liking to share an apartment with three other men, all of whom are absolute strangers to me, and one of whom deprives me of my night's rest by

snoring frightfully. You see, I made a bad job of it, quarrelling with the Hôtel d'Orange man, and having to rough it at the Europe."

"If you are three to one, why don't the rest of you put the snoring individual out of the window?" inquires Mrs. Lyster. "It would give him a good lesson. I always believe people can help snoring if they have a mind to. It only comes from lying obstinately on their backs, or from an overdue affection for hot suppers. *I* should never allow anyone to interfere in that way with my comfort or rest, if I had any means, fair or foul, of preventing them."

"We gently remonstrate with the gentleman," replies Mr. Harcourt, "but nobody conceived the brilliant idea of the window. Luckily we *have* one, and it is not very high from the ground, and I shall suggest it to-night.

"For your comfort," Maude Meredith

says, "the crowd is likely to thin in a few days. It usually does about the middle of August. That dreadful throng of transients—people who rush here for a day or two from Liège, and Verviers, and Aix, to gamble away all their money, and annoy their neighbours—lessen then."

"Awful creatures they are—a mixture of bad tobacco and Lambic—as they go fighting over their wretched two-franc pieces. Honesty is a word they have not got in their dictionary. I speak feelingly. The other night I won a nap. at Trente et Quarante, and an old woman from Aix collared it at once, vowing she had put it on 'Rouge gagne et couleur perd.' Remonstrance was Japanese to her, so I had to stand by, and see her toddle out with two naps. in her pocket, and a complacent smile on her face," Ainsworth Harcourt murmurs crossly.

"The crowd will not lessen, however,

until after the fancy ball. I know a number of Bruxellois and Parisians who are coming expressly for it," Monsieur De Lanoy says. He is sitting in as close proximity as he can to Val, his bright hazel eyes fixed admiringly on her face. "The ball comes off next Saturday, does it not? Are any of you ladies going in costume?"

"Hum! I might perhaps achieve a success if I personated one of Macbeth's witches," remarks Mrs. Lyster grimly, with a half smile on her thin lips. "I don't know any other character I could support, and since that would not prove particularly attractive, I think I shall remain content with my own."

"I fancy I shall go as Marie Antoinette," Miss Meredith announces demurely, as though it was a sudden and original idea, and as though she had not already appeared at half a dozen fancy balls in that same costume.

"And *you*, shall you go as Queen of Beauty?" Monsieur De Lanoy inquires of Val in a low, earnest tone.

"What a ridiculous question!" she answers, opening her eyes wide as she turns towards him, "you might as well ask me if I am going as Anne Boleyn or Marie Stuart. Do you think I have insensate vanity? I cannot imagine any woman who had *not* an insensate vanity, deliberately personating the most famous beauties in the world."

Louis De Lanoy shrugs his shoulders after the fashion of his country. To his thinking, neither Anne Boleyn nor Marie Stuart could have owned more peerless beauty than that which looks out at him from under a simple straw hat.

"Plenty of ladies are vain then," he says presently, "for I never heard of a *bal costumé* yet without at least a dozen Marie Stuarts

and Anne Boleyns, but I *do* want to know what you will wear."

"Do you? Very well, I shall gratify your curiosity. Like Mrs. Lyster, I shall be content with going as 'myself.' I have no originality to think of a character nor sufficient ingenuity to arrange a costume."

"Pouf! Lisette can arrange the dress, if you can decide on one," Mrs. Lyster breaks in. She has what they call in France a decided "caprice" for Val, and wishes her to be as much admired as possible.

But to fix on a fancy dress is the grand difficulty. Val can think of nothing which is not either too hackneyed or else too imposing.

Undine, Bo-peep, Spring, Night—a dozen are suggested. Maude Meredith utters condescendingly, "La Princesse de Lamballe," Mrs. Lyster pronounces Nourmahal, Louis De Lanoy whispers "Un Ange," and Ains-

worth Harcourt puts in with a meaning look
“A Dryad.”

Val understands at once that he alludes to her recent sylvan rambles, and she gives a laugh that adds a sparkle to her beauty.

“You are not in earnest, Mr. Harcourt,” she cries, “but perhaps you have hit on a really good idea. Do you remember Andersen’s famous story of the discontented Dryad who went to Paris, and whose longing for excitement and sight-seeing was so great that at last life was given her for a single night. Why cannot I take that character?”

“Bah! nobody would remember the story,” Mrs. Lyster says imperatively, “and the costume would not be worth looking at—just a few yards of cheap muslin, and a wreath of hops and things on your head. Never take a character that will not give you the fullest scope for a becoming dress ;

you might as well think of Queen Pomare, her costume cost neither money nor trouble; or of that story about the traveller arrived from Honolulu, who displayed among other curiosities a string of beads.

"*C'est un collier !*" cried his lady visitors.

"Pardon, *mesdames*, *c'est une robe !*" he answered, laughing at their blushes.
"Keith!"

Mr. Fairfax, at the sound of his name, saunters towards the group from a solitary seat at a little distance, on which he has been indulging in unsociability.

"Can you suggest a fancy dress for Miss Egerton, pray?"

Keith seats himself, and is lost in momentary meditation. Then he looks up at Val, and gives a slight smile.

"I found a character for Miss Egerton while I sat under yonder tree, but whether

it would answer for a ball I have no idea."

"What may it be?" questions Ainsworth Harcourt, indolently. He leans back in his chair with a knitted brow, and pulls at the ends of his golden moustache. "Some of us fancy that we have found Miss Egerton's character too."

"It is, 'My Lady Coquette,'" Keith says quietly. "Does anybody remember an illustration of Herrick's verses?"

Of course everyone professes to recollect it, except Monsieur De Lanoy, who honestly avows that the "English colloquial is quite difficult enough, but that *les vers Anglais* are simply *atroces*." The recollection of the party is hazy, however.

"Can you repeat the verse?" Mrs. Lyster asks, and Keith answers that he only knows a line or so by heart. When he comes to the fragment,

"I do confess thou'rt sweet, but find
Thee such an unthrift of thy sweets—
Thy favours are but like the wind,
That kisseth everything it meets,"

all eyes turn on Val, and there is a general laugh. She laughs brightly herself, but flushes, too, with anger, and thinks that Keith's conduct is unjustifiable in repeating such lines. Everyone agrees that the right character has been found, however, and Mrs. Lyster, with a view to the ball, inquires what the illustration was like.

"A girl in a dress of sixteen hundred and something—powdered hair, high ruff, long stomacher, a brocaded train, the girl's face peerlessly lovely."

Val flushes again, but this time a thrill of pleasure accompanies it.

"It will be easy to get up a costume like that you suggest. Yes," and Mrs. Lyster nods at Val, "I think it will do."

"But, Mrs. Lyster," the girl cries, aghast

at the undertaking, and aware that but a very small portion of the pelf that Keith found in the Parc at Brussels remains to pay for extra finery, "you forget the costume."

"Lisette will attend to all that, my dear," says the old lady, nodding her head again, just as Cinderella's fairy godmother probably nodded her Lilliputian head over the rats and the pumpkin coach.

Everybody who knows her is aware that she is not penurious; on the contrary, she is lavishly generous, and never spares any expense in carrying out a whim of the moment. Just now her whim is to make a charming "Lady Coquette" of Val, and unheeding any remonstrances uttered by her, or any looks of surprise from her niece, Miss Meredith, she desires Keith to give her his arm, that she may go at once and consult Lisette on the details of the toilette.

As Keith obeys, he turns towards Val with a covert pleading in his dark grey eyes.

"Do you feel inclined for a stroll to-day? It is very much cooler among the hills than in this valley, and I have discovered a new and delicious path."

"What in the wide world do you imagine Miss Egerton to be made of, *mon ami*?" asks Louis De Lanoy. "A delicious up-hill path on such a day as this! *Mon Dieu!* the English are very droll."

"It *is* much cooler on the hills—*much*," says Val, very decidedly. "I know it is, for I have tried it."

"Will you try it again?"

Now Keith can no more conceal an earnestness in his tone than he can fly. Val hesitates a moment. Shall she punish him for that matter of the verses? she asks herself. Suddenly she makes a little *moue*

mutine at her French adorer, throws a defiant smile at him, and answers—

“Yes.”

Keith passes away across the grass, with Mrs. Lyster on his arm, and with an expression of satisfaction on his face, and Louis De Lanoy looks after him with anything but a friendly regard.

“Of all insufferable bores, those fellows who go in for physical training and that kind of thing are the worst,” he observes, with a sneer. “I did not know Fairfax was in that line, until he took to training you at such a rate, Miss Egerton. Why do you suffer him to impose on your good nature so much?—*parole d’honneur*, I think it is too bad!”

“I am not much in the habit of allowing people to impose on my good nature,” Val replies, rather haughtily. “If I did not wish to be trained, you may be sure Mr. Fairfax

would not get a chance of training me."

While the snubbed Gaul reflects in silence on this dignified reply, and on the singular taste that women, especially Englishwomen, occasionally affect, as, for instance, toiling up a hill with a slow coach like Fairfax, instead of sitting idly under a shady tree with himself, Ainsworth Harcourt turns to Miss Meredith.

"They have not invited us to join them in their expedition, but suppose we take the liberty of inviting ourselves? They must find something very delightful to repay them for such exertion; while it is undoubtedly suffocatingly hot down here, and promises to be hotter as the day wears on."

"Perhaps they may not want us," she suggests, shrinking from such a prospect of exertion, and yet not liking to refuse absolutely. "They seem quite sufficient society for one another," she adds, with uncon-

trollable *malice prepense*, watching his countenance as she speaks.

“We shall not trouble their *égoïsme à deux*,” he replies, coolly enough. “The woodland paths are luckily as free to us as to them—*do* come.”

And so Miss Meredith, like Val, though more unwillingly, murmurs—

“Yes.”

CHAPTER VI.

MAMMON *versus* CUPID.

“God of the world and worldlings—

Great Mammon! greatest god below the sky.”

SPENSER.

SHE heartily regrets having said “Yes,” when the path along which they perceive the other couple, far above them, leads up a very steep ascent, though fortunately it is shaded over darkly and greenly. Val trips on with light elastic steps, but Miss Meredith has never had a training along with Plant and Jack over rough and wild Devonshire woods and hills, and she feels that this is but a poor exchange for the

gay scene and velvet turf she has left below. She lags more and more each moment, leans heavily on her escort's arm, and finally asserts, panting and flurried, that she can go no further. Ainsworth Harcourt recognises his mistake in forgetting that some women who are fashioned for the ball-room are not also fashioned for mountain tops, and he bears the consequence with becoming patience.

"Let us sit down here and rest awhile," he says, "and then we will go back instead of forward."

The place which he indicates is on the side of the hill, on a little bench in a leafy nook, and a view is spread out before them which might well repay them for the arduous ascent, did either of them possess any appreciation of the picturesque.

The densely-wooded hill-side shelves rather abruptly down, and below lies a

lovely green valley. The air which comes to them is cool and fresh—a very elixir of vitality compared with the feeble stir of Zephyr's wing that Spa itself owns. The world, and the world's beauty, invites their admiration; the boundless ocean of ether above their heads is far and blue and faint; a wild, sweet fragrance of the woods encompasses them.

But these two are matter-of-fact and material enough. The loveliness of faint blue ether, the greenness of wood and valley, the perfume of flowers—"earth's fairest children,"—find no favour in their sight.

"At least we have found coolness," remarks Mr. Harcourt, taking off his hat, so that the breeze may come to his brow, upon which little light rings of fair, damp hair are lying.

"Yes," Maude assents languidly; "but I

hardly think it worth all the dreadful exertion we have undergone. What must Keith and that girl be made of, I wonder? They must have iron frames and strength."

"Sometimes I rather like expeditions of this sort myself," he answers. "But I am very sorry I persuaded you to come, only to fatigue yourself like this."

"Oh, it does not matter," she replies, fanning herself violently. "We are comfortable to a certain extent here; and most likely the descent will not be so unpleasant. How far can the others be going?"

"To the very top, I fancy. They are both such excellent pedestrians, you know. I saw that Fairfax had his sketch-book, too, and probably purposes uniting work with pleasure."

"He has carried that always of late. A revival of his old fancy to be an artist seems to have come over him. My aunt is ex-

tremely disgusted—and, indeed, I do not wonder she is. For any man with such expectations as his—the thing is too absurd.”

“Perhaps he thinks that expectations may yet come to naught,” Mr. Harcourt remarks, lazily stroking his moustache, and appearing to speak carelessly. “Mrs. Lyster is rather given to being capricious, is she not?”

“With regard to Keith, no, she is not. He is the one relation about whom she has never been capricious. She is very much attached to him, in her way. And I am certain that, if she had to leave her money absolutely to either one or the other, she would leave it to him in preference to me.”

A moment's silence follows this statement. It is a statement that has been made with an *arrière pensée*, Ainsworth Harcourt feels; and as he looks dreamily into the far purple distance, his handsome face impassive as marble, he realises that another of his casts

for wealth has failed. It is this realization, perhaps, that brings a slight tone of bitterness into his voice when he exclaims—

“Then I suppose you mean to marry Keith Fairfax, Maude?”

“What else *can* I do?” she asks, with a faint flush rising on her fair face. “You know very well how I am placed. I have only a pittance of my own; and if I don’t marry Keith, I hardly think my aunt will leave me a shilling—at least, anything worth mentioning.”

Another deep silence succeeds, and a longer one. A big vicious-looking wasp, with brown filmy wings, comes and settles on a wild blossom near them. Then it buzzes away again. Far below they can distinguish a waggon, like a large white speck, winding along a road. A few feathery white clouds are floating athwart the great sapphire plains of sky. The two are all

alone, entirely alone on the wild hill-side, and they have for many months played at "making love." Listen, then, in what passionate words these cold-blooded, mercenary-minded worldlings will say "farewell," if farewell must be said by them. We all know that Romeo and Juliet would *not* have said it, but they were foolish, inconsequent young people, who fortunately did not live to test the agreeabilities of a narrow income.

This time Maude Meredith is the first to break the silence, and for once her accents have lost their metallic ring, and grown a little timid.

"Ainsworth, can you blame me? You cannot think it possible for me to act otherwise?"

"No, I don't blame you," he says, and again bitterness mars the usually pleasant voice. "Why should I blame you? You

have been reared in certain social conditions, which of course it would be sheer madness on my part to ask you to resign."

She turns round and faces him, with a sudden sparkle of surprise and indignation in her pale blue eyes. Even to her, stolid, indifferent as she is, a sense of his injustice comes.

"Have you ever asked me to resign them?" she demands. "You *know* that you have not! You know that you have no right whatever to take such a tone as this! You know quite well that you are the last, the very last man on earth, Ainsworth Harcourt, to marry a *poor* woman!"

"Granted!" he replies coolly, though a crimson flush dyes his face now, and for an instant he bites his lip hard. "But though you seem to reproach me, you know *why* it is so. You know that people in *our* world cannot subsist on sentiment, nor yet

on a few paltry hundreds a year. I am, I avow, one of those miserable devils to whom the bitter irony of fate has given the position, tastes, and habits of a gentleman, without the means of supporting them. You are the corresponding woman. Common sense—the *commonest* sense—will tell you whether or not it would be sheer madness for us two to marry!"

He puts his hat on again as he finishes, and pulls it low down on his forehead, an act which with many men is extremely significant of ruffled temper.

Miss Meredith holds her tongue while she reflects. There cannot be the least doubt but that common sense does tell her—has told her long, long before this—whether or not they can afford to marry, but it is none the less true that common sense is not what she yearns to listen to now.

In the most vapid soul that a sojourn in

Tophet ever starved, there is still some small lodging left for that divine folly that men call "love." This woman—fair, stolid, passive—loves this man who sits, ruffled in temper, with a frowning brow, by her side.

She loves him—not to the extent of resigning anything for him, not to the degree of making any self-sacrifice for him, even if he were foolish enough to ask it, but quite enough to feel a very bitter pang at parting with him—quite enough to make her long, *long* as much as any village girl might do, for just a crumb of comfort, just a word of tenderness from his lips. She glances at him. Fair, cold, and stolid, Maude Meredith is material too. Ainsworth Harcourt is a wonderfully handsome man, and she worships beauty. The more she looks at him, the more she craves for a gleam of passion in his ultramarine eyes, the stronger grows her desire to listen to love from the

well-cut lips, but she craves in vain.

Silent, he gazes steadily under the level rim of his hat at the range of hills melting in the far distance into the sky. At last it falls to her to break the silence once more.

"Yes, I know all that," she says wearily, with a dreadfully sore, sick feeling of disappointment at her heart. "It was hardly worth while your telling me. I have heard nothing but 'common sense' all my life, but sometimes one grows tired of hearing it."

The tone of her voice tells more than her words; there is a betraying quiver in it which makes him turn quickly and look at her. The pale eyes that meet his own have absolutely tears—great, glittering, unshed tears—in them. They are tears of vexation, of wounded vanity, and self-love, as well as of pain; but, of course, he cannot know that.

Little as she thinks it, Maude Meredith has never in her life looked more lovely or more loveable than at this moment. She has in a measure forgotten herself, and the cold, supercilious expression has left her features. Ainsworth Harcourt has never been really what is understood by the term "in love" with her, and of late even the incipient fancy he had for her has very nearly died away; but still he is a gentleman, and he realises suddenly that this woman cares for him far more than he had imagined.

"Forgive me for having repeated anything, then, that wearies you," he says, clasping her white cold hand in his own. "You *must* feel that it is as hard—*much more* hard, indeed—for me to utter than for you to hear. Good heavens! do you imagine I am thinking of myself?" (For a moment, perhaps, he really fancies he is

not.) "It is of *you* that I have thought. How can I be so selfish as to ask you to give up for *me* everything that you have been taught all your life to consider worth possessing? But if you *will* do so, Maude! I can only say that you will make me very happy, and I shall strive very earnestly to keep you from ever regretting it."

Brave words these are, and bravely spoken, with not a single falter in the tone—not a sign of what they cost but a swift pallor sweeping across his face. Let us do this worldling credit—let us confess that it is very well done for a man to whom nothing could be more terrible than to be taken at his word.

But frankly, Ainsworth Harcourt has not reckoned without his host. It is a curious, and rather absurd sense of *noblesse oblige* that has forced him to risk this declaration, but he knows the woman beside him too

well not to be *almost* certain of her reply. The event justifies the expectation; for a moment she is tempted to bind him down then and there to the offer he has made; tempted by *himself*, by his Antinous beauty of golden hair and chiselled features; tempted by the most genuine love that her shallow soul has ever known, but it is only for a moment.

Mammon and Cupid have run a neck to neck race, but the former beats by several lengths.

"It is impossible," she falters, with the thrill at her heart echoing in her accents. "You were perfectly right in all that you said a minute ago, and I—I know it as well as you do. We have been reared under certain conditions, and for certain ends, you and I, and we could not put them aside. We are fit for nothing but society, and society would not recognise us if we were poor and

struggling; we should simply mar each other's lives, and render each other miserable. *I* could not bear poverty, and neither could you, therefore——" she breaks down, and large tears chase one another rapidly down her cheeks, but she dashes them hurriedly away. "Therefore it is quite impossible for us to think of marrying."

"And you will let Mrs. Lyster hand you deliberately over to Fairfax?" he questions jealously, wrathfully. Like the dog in the manger, he does not want this woman himself; in fact, he is unquestionably relieved at all she has said, but he grudges her to another man all the same. Jealousy is a passion that is often wonderfully independent of the passion of love. Mr Harcourt is very loth indeed that Keith Fairfax, whom he has never liked, should possess this fair pink and white showpiece for his wealth.

"I suppose it *will* come to that," Maude

says, with a sigh. "And, after all, the necessity might be worse, for Keith is not actually so disagreeable as the men whom many women marry."

"But you care nothing for him, Maude, you care for me!" he exclaims passionately, with almost a mind to claim her sooner than that she should pass in this way out of his life.

"I know, and yet!"

"And yet you will marry him?"

"Yes!"

Upon this Ainsworth Harcourt releases her hand with a pettish gesture, and subsides into silence. He is not of a nature to ponder deeply on social or any other kind of evils, but just now the sordidness of all this strikes him very forcibly, and he wonders for a moment how such women as these can hold themselves a degree higher than Circassians and other Eastern females.

“Of course, I don’t care for Keith Fairfax,” Miss Meredith says, slowly and meditatively, “but even if I don’t, what of it? Do people in our world deem it necessary to care for the man or the woman whom they marry?” and Mr. Harcourt reflecting on the world of which she speaks, cannot honestly affirm that they do.

CHAPTER VII.

ALONE ON THE HILL-TOPS.

“Love is not to be reasoned down or lost
 In high ambition or a thirst for greatness ;
 ’Tis second life. It grows into the soul,
 Warms every vein, and beats in every pulse.”

ADDISON.

WHILE the race between Mammon and Cupid is run, Val and Keith Fairfax have made their way to the summit of the hill. Below them lie valley, and meadow, and stream in enchanting combination of colour and form ; above them are fleecy cloudlets skimming quickly across the sky, and tempering the noonday heat ; and from their position they command a view of the Redoute, the

houses, and the hotels nestling within the green basin of Spa.

“Does it not look *bakingly* hot down there?” says Val complacently as a pleasant soft breeze wanders over her face, and boldly woos her red lips and blush-rose cheeks. “A valley amongst hills at mid-day must really be the most intolerable place in the world! I am so glad we came, and I wish we had brought some luncheon, so that we need not have to go down till evening. Why had you not the sense to think of it?”

“I *did* think of it,” Keith answers, “but I had not the audacity to propose that you should spend a whole afternoon in my humble society, nor vanity enough to fancy that you would find it supportable.”

“Now I call that mock modesty. I really do not believe that you ever gave a thought to luncheon, else your humility might have allowed you to remember that I have lately

spent several afternoons in your society, and since I am here again, the natural inference is that I *have* found it tolerably supportable."

"It is very good of you to say that," he rejoins with a pleased smile, "and in return for your candour, I will confess that humility was not altogether the cause of my failure to bring the cakes and chocolate which are your favourite refectations ; I did think of it, but another and a better idea presented itself for our consideration. There is a sweet little rustic café or restaurant perched close by on the decline yonder, sheltered by a clump of trees, where I found out that we could obtain a simple Arcadian repast. In the course of one of my solitary rambles, I went there the other day, and after giving me a bounteous supply of home-made bread and fresh milk, the old woman who reigns proprietress pressed on me a fat chicken, 'slaughtered and cooked within ten min-

utes.' I am sure you are pastoral enough to relish brown bread and milk, and if your appetite is very healthy, we can share the chicken. Shall we go by-and-by and see what we can get?"

"By all means," cries Val, with childish pleasure dancing in her eyes. "How nice it will be—just like a pic-nic, and I adore pic-nics; you see, I have been to so few in my life. Fresh milk is a thing I haven't tasted since I left home, but," her face falls considerably, "how about Miss Meredith and Mr. Harcourt? Of course they will be here presently, and we shall be obliged to ask them to go with us. The old woman will not be able to provide for so many."

"As for that, I daresay there are several fat chickens ready to be sacrificed; but you need not fear, the others will not come, I felt quite certain of that when I saw them loitering up behind us. Maude is too much

of an indolent fine lady, and she never mounted a hill in her life, and I very much doubt whether Harcourt finds such exertion agreeable. At this moment probably their faces are turned in saddened wisdom towards the attractions of the Redoute."

"I hope so with all my heart. There is a fitness in all things, and neither Miss Meredith nor Mr. Harcourt would suit a spot like this. Now you and I would make a capital pair of gipsies, shouldn't we?"

"I think so," he says, gazing at her winsome face. "So we will go a-gipsying to-day, though we have not a kettle to make our own tea, or in which to cook our own rabbit."

"Now who ever heard of cooking a rabbit in a kettle? Men are so dreadfully stupid about things," laughs Val. "Or who ever heard of gipsies drinking *tea*? I

am afraid your knowledge of the habits of vagrants is remarkably limited. You see, you are so town-bred. Now *I* have seen gipsies, real brown gipsies—they came to our house and told my fortune.”

“I hope it was a good one?”

“Do they ever tell any other than nice fortunes? They are too cunning not to be kind in their prophecies. I was to marry very young, live very happily ever afterwards, and be very rich, all of which seems in a fair way to come to pass, doesn’t it?” and she laughs again, but this time with a little shade over her face.

“Did they enter into minor details?—did they allude at all to the probable appearance of your future husband?”

“Yes—oh! yes. They said he was to be tall and good-looking, with a high colour and reddish hair—just like Jack.”

Stab! stab! go her careless words.

What a twinge he feels in his left side, but he only says gently,

“Phoo! I have no faith whatever in foolish gipsies!” and he begins to make a sepia sketch.

The summit of the hill is almost as level as a table, and the two are seated near one another under the grateful shade of a huge beech, with their faces turned towards the south, from whence a wind comes to rustle the leaves overhead, while it lifts at the same time the russet brown curls that cluster on Val’s white forehead. As Keith sketches, she talks that gay nonsense which is pleasanter than the wisdom of sages when we hearken with partial ears. There is apparently no constraint between them. They seem to have established a sort of *camaraderie*, which is as agreeable as it is rare between the sexes.

With most young ladies of the nineteenth

century such a thing would be impossible, or, if possible, would probably degenerate after a while into that familiarity which eventually brings in its train the disgust of which the old proverb tells. But Val is neither a "cut-and-dried" young lady, nor a girl of the period, fast of manner and slangy of speech, with whom we have all, more or less, the ill fortune to be acquainted. She is only a sweet, outspoken maiden, with intelligence and plenty of faults, that are yet pleasant to look on; a girl whose lifelong companionship with Plant and Jack has fitted her to be the comrade of another man in just such fashion, provided that that man has the sense to treat her like a reasonable being with brains, and does not insist upon regarding her solely in the light of a recipient of namby-pamby compliments and a frivolous partner in the game called flirtation.

Not that Val does not like both compliments and flirtations, the latter especially in their proper place; but, as she has just remarked, there is a fitness in all things, and their place is *not* in the fair sylvan shades and greenwood haunts which are associated with all the simple healthy pleasures of the childhood that she has scarcely yet left behind. After a little while she proceeds to call Keith to account for what he said about her resemblance to "My Lady Coquette."

"I did not exactly understand the point of it; but I suppose you mean that I resembled her in smiling too indiscriminately. I don't pretend for a moment to deny the charge. Of course I desire to make myself as nice and agreeable as I can to everybody, and why should I not?" she asks, with pretty defiance.

"An extremely commendable desire, if properly regulated," remarks the artist, with

gravity; "but if not properly regulated, very likely to lead to unpleasant results, as in the case of 'My Lady Coquette.'"

"What unpleasant results could possibly happen from my smiles? I have no one to hold me accountable—at least, not *here*," she says, with a heightened colour.

Keith glances up at her; unconsciously there is a reproachful expression in his eyes.

"True, there is no one here to whom you are accountable for your actions," he replies, "but it is not pleasant to evoke criticism. Do you remember being very indignant because you overheard Iona Norman, at the Kursaal, call you an unscrupulous flirt? That was one result, if it was a small one."

"Bah!" cries Val, with an accent caught from Mrs. Lyster. "I did not really mind that malicious remark one bit. She only said so because the man I was dancing with had been a quondam admirer of hers."

Keith shakes his head over his sketch, and he tries to hide from her the cloud that rises on his brow. "I am sadly afraid, my Lady Coquette," he says, "that the worst result is in yourself. I am terribly afraid that the love of admiration, and the desire to win it, have already made you a little careless from whence it comes, or at what cost to other women it is obtained."

She grows scarlet, a vivid, painful scarlet, and her sensitive mouth quivers as though in pain.

"You say very unpleasant things," she murmurs, in a low voice. "I don't know why I should submit to it. No one else ever finds fault with me. No one else ever *dared* to pick holes in me!" Her voice rises higher, and her eyes flash like diamonds through a mist of tears. "And now, while you think fit to reprove me, papa never says a single word, and Mrs. Lyster appears

to consider that the more men I attract the better !”

He does not look off his drawing while she speaks, and for this she is thankful. Not for worlds would she let him see that his approval or disapproval matters one jot to her.

“It is because no one else finds fault with you that I have ventured to do so,” he answers gently, even humbly—so gently that Val, whom a kind word vanquishes at once, feels her indignation vanish. “It is also because I am interested in the matter more than anyone else here can be, I think. I was drawn to you when we first met at Brussels because you were so fresh, so open, so unlike the girls one meets by hundreds all over the world. You may judge, then, whether or not it pains me to see you lose any of your distinctive charm, to fear that you may assimilate daily nearer and nearer

to a standard which is unworthy of your imitation, to *know* that you may cheapen the value of your smiles by showering them on every man, fool or otherwise, who is presented to you."

His dark grey eyes, which he lifts now to her own, have a strange and new-born light in them—a light which she hardly understands. That he is in earnest, she cannot but believe; but since he never "makes love" to her after the mode of Mr. Harcourt, or any of the other butterflies that flit perpetually around her, she does not comprehend why he should take so much interest in the deterioration of her character or the wasting of her smiles.

Revolving this in her mind for some minutes, she can arrive at no satisfactory elucidation.

"In short," she says at last, perplexed and angry—yet not exactly angry—"you mean

that you agree with that spiteful woman at the Kursaal, and consider me an unscrupulous flirt?"

"You wrong me very much when you think that," he exclaims quickly. "But you do *not* mean it. You know exactly all I feel and think."

There is something, scarcely an expression, but the shadow of one, she catches. Whatever it is, it has the effect of making her turn away with a gay, mocking laugh, as she takes up a small stone, and, with all her puny strength, hurls it over the edge of the hill. In the days of their common childhood, Plant taught her how to throw a stone, and she is not a little proud of the rare feminine accomplishment.

"I know I am not perfect," she remarks, after a minute or two. "It is only angels who are perfect; and I—well, you do not

require me to tell you that I am not an angel. But don't paint me blacker than I am, and let us drop the subject. I shall not come on any more of these excursions, if you intend improving each shining hour by lecturing me. Truth is awfully disagreeable as a rule, and I—I like to hear only pleasant things. I have been so accustomed to be fed on sugar all my life, you know."

She asserts this with such *naïveté* that it is captivating, whilst in some women a similar vanity would be simply repellent.

"I know; and that is the reason why the physic that is good for you sometimes is so distasteful. But I will not say another word that is not 'nice.' You are determined to ensure silence when you threaten not to come with me again. Let us make a complete diversion by going for our bread and milk. Are you ready and willing?"

“Ready and willing, and desperately hungry,” she says.

So, when the drawing materials are gathered up, they set their faces towards the woodland *café*.

The path which they follow is by no means even so good or smooth as the one by which they ascended; but it has the merit of being well shaded by overhanging boughs from the vertical rays of the August sun, and they laugh as merrily as a couple of children as they (she clinging to his arm) scramble down the decline. There is something very pleasant to both of them in this complete isolation from everybody and everything, in the very dependence she has upon him, in the assistance which he gives her as he breaks a way for her through the thick undergrowth, or helps her carefully over stones and rocks.

It is after all but a modern and more

correct version of Haidee and Juan, the isolation, the dependence, the youth, and the good looks of the two human beings cast in one another's way like this.

The bourn of their journey reached, they indulge with relish in their lacteal repast, and refuse the proprietress's other kindly offers, so that the unwary bird that is pecking peacefully round the door-steps is spared till another occasion. Renovated physically, they take their backward route; but the time has flown by, just as time does fly by, in joy and sorrow both, and the hottest hours of the day are pretty well over. As they mount up to their favourite glen, the wilderness of green is touched here and there with gold, but only here and there, for they are on the eastern side of the hill, and the sun has nearly left it. Masses of grey stone lie alongside of the path, cushioned with tender moss, and

draped with delicate ferns. The sylvan solitude is all their own, and so fair is it, so quiet, and so elfish, that no possible phenomenon which could occur could startle them—not even the apparition of a lovely princess on a snow-white palfrey or a knight in a green and gold hunting-suit. So deeply in shade have they been that, when they reach the summit, they are surprised to find how early it really is, how high the sun blazes still in the orange and grey western sky, and how bathed in streams of yellow light is a good deal of the world around them.

Val throws herself down on the grass, and Keith establishes himself as near her as the *convenances* allow.

“We need not surely think of going down for an hour or so,” she says, half closing her lids in a dreamy way, and feeling very comfortable and content.

"I am not likely to hurry our departure from this," he replies, thinking to himself how delightful it would be if he were Paul and she Virginia; and what a paradise a *vie à deux* might be made.

"What do you suppose, by the way, the people down there"—(and she points to the Redoute)—"will think of us?"

"Public opinion, as much as knows anything about us, will probably be divided between flirtation, death, or elopement. Our special friends—that is, your father and my aunt—if they give us a thought, will quietly take it for granted that we are amusing ourselves, a conclusion in which they would not be far wrong."

"Don't you think it might be best to speak only for yourself?" Val asks drily. "How do you know I am amused? At this moment I may be inwardly pining for Mr. Harcourt or Monsieur De Lanoy, or

some one on whom to bestow the smiles you condemn."

"You do not *look* as if you were pining."

"Yes, but you see the feminine physiognomy is so awfully deceptive."

"Not yours! not yours!" he cries hastily, with an earnestness that the occasion in nowise seems to warrant. "If I thought that face was untrue, I should be——"

He stops dead short, and colours.

"Be what?" she asks; but she too colours.

"*Miserable.*"

A little pause. The pink colour comes and goes on her cheek, the big black eyes hide their gleam beneath the curling lashes. Just the faintest ghost of a triumphant smile lurks in the corners of her mouth as she thinks of that vow she made at Brussels.

Keith watches her quietly, then he sighs.

After all, he thinks to himself, she is only a will-o'-the-wisp leading him on by the glitter of her beauty, just to pass out of his life absolutely in a little while. As he reflects thus, he feels very miserable; but with the contrariety of human nature, while his soul is brimful of sentiment, his lips utter common-place.

"Any way, you liked the bread and milk?"

"I don't know. You see, it was so innocent," she answers, with a significant look.

"True, and, therefore, better for you than being fed on pernicious flattery and highly seasoned compliments; but you like *them*."

"Sometimes I do," she confesses honestly. "It would be very dull if one had no colour or spice in one's existence. I dare say I should die of *ennui*. I love a dash of excitement, and it is very pleasant to know

that lots of men are worshipping me, and trying to rival each other for my favour ; and what is woman's vocation, after all, but to make fools of men, and not let them find it out?" she questions, with a saucy smile.

No smile does she evoke from him ; he looks at her hard, gravely, and steadily. He is wondering if, after all, it is only an ideal that he is adoring, if it is a lovely, soulless doll—a doll with pink and white cheeks and black eyes, at whose feet he is lavishing every inch of his heart.

"Women carry out their vocation bravely," he says, after a pause ; "and men, or rather fools, never stop to consider what there is in any of the sex for them to go mad about. If they could only keep in mind that a pretty face bewitches them, that marriage succeeds the enthrallment, and satiety sets

in before a fortnight has run its course—for one *must* grow tired of women, just as one does of wine, or horses, the rattle of the roulette ball, the croak of the croupier, the whirl of the ball-room, the glare of the gas-light—in fact, of all things in this wearisome lower world. All the pearly-skinned, odalisque-eyed deities on earth *must* pall on us—for what are a few becks and nods and wreathed smiles but a flat return for the best and truest feelings of our heart, expended without reserve?”

Val stares at him in silence. Such a tirade has never fallen from his lips before. She does not speak, but sits, a little ruffled in temper, with a line or two puckering her brow, and a pout on her mouth that serves to make it more tempting, and she drags up pitilessly handfuls of grass, and scatters it to wither and die.

Keith marks the face, the petulant gesture, and he is sorry that he has spoken words to mar the pleasantness of the hour.

"Forgive me," he murmurs, penitently. "I had no right to give forth such sentiments. You will believe me to be quite a misogynist, instead of which I admire women—that is, one woman more than——"

"You need not expatiate on her attractions," she interrupts, hastily. "I am aware that you have not forgotten the old days in which 'Gertrude Heneage' lived!"

A tide of crimson blood surges over her face.

"Gertrude Heneage! I was not thinking of her," he says, quietly and slowly.

She glances up at him quickly, with a question in her eyes. The answer she meets in his has the effect of soothing her ruffled temper at once. But neither of them speaks, as they sit side by side, watching the sun

sinking to his rest. They know that the world below them is all astir with life and gaiety, but they only feel a sense of moral as well as physical exaltation at being elevated so far above it, at being perched alone with each other on this serene hill-top. They are supremely satisfied and content. They scarcely know why themselves. It is one of those golden hours in life which are vouchsafed now and then, though rarely, to all of us, hours in which the feverish struggle of existence appears to cease, when no memory of the past or anticipation of the future comes to trouble us with either regret or solicitude, or mar the calm in which we rest content, like children, with the present. On such an hour we often look back ever so wistfully, wondering whether we rated it at its true value, while it rested like a benediction on our heads. Most likely its fairy-enchanted moments slipped by unheeded

through our careless fingers, and we only awoke with a thrill when we stood, like the first parents, outside the gates of Eden, a new Adam or a new Eve, regretful and desolate !

So it is with Val, heedless, light-hearted, careless, laughter-loving Val. Little she recks of the uneventful past, the possibly equally uneventful future, or the intense peace and quiet of the present.

But Keith Fairfax is wiser, and he hoards like a miser the seconds which are flying too fast. If it were possible to say to old Father Time, "Linger yet awhile," how gladly would he say it; but since Joshua, no mortal voice has had power over that autocrat of life. He watches, therefore, sadly and reluctantly, the sun-god nearing his bed of glory, and after a silence which has lasted some time, he speaks abruptly.

"There is something which I wish to say to you before we leave this to-day, yet you cannot tell how I dread to speak one word which might in any way spoil the memory of a day which has been to me so altogether bright."

Val looks up in surprise.

"Why should you say anything that could mar it? If it is anything more about my flirtations, I——"

"No," he interrupts. "It is about myself. I mean to be dreadfully egotistical, and to tell you more than I have ever told anyone in my whole life!"

"Do you?" she says, with both astonishment and curiosity in her eyes. "Please don't hesitate, for I shall be so glad to listen, especially if it is a heart history. I like heart histories above all things, even in novels, but in real life they must be awfully interesting and exciting!"

“Listen, then, and I trust with all my
soul that *my* heart history will prove inter-
esting to *you*!”

CHAPTER VIII.

JACK !

"Oh, then the longest summer day
 Seemed too, too much in haste; still the full heart
 Had not imparted half. 'Twas happiness
 Too exquisite to last !"

BLAIR.

KEITH hesitates, in spite of the encouragement vouchsafed him, and another golden minute drops like a bubble into the great gulf of time.

Then turning, he leans on his elbow, and looks at her steadily with his handsome eyes that are

"As the sky and sea on a grey day."

"Do you remember that you asked me

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not very long ago if I did not mean to make a holocaust of myself on the altar of interestedness?"

Val is surprised, and perhaps a trifle startled at this sudden and unexpected question. She plucks another great handful of green grass, and shies it ever such a distance, where it falls like an emerald shower into space, before she replies,

"Yes, I remember, but the question was a very impertinent one, and there is not the slightest necessity for you to answer it, you know, especially if you don't want to do so."

Keith smiles. When he smiles, he grows wonderfully good-looking, as good-looking as Ainsworth Harcourt. It may be only from the contrast of mirth to his ordinary gravity. Val thinks just now that it would require a very strong head on feminine shoulders to resist the fascination of the dark grey eyes, and of the soft, almost womanly

tender smile that breaks on his mouth.

"I promised you that I would answer the question, and I always like to keep my word—most men do, you know. Moreover, the answer is very brief, and will not require much trouble to utter, or for you to hear. It is simply, *No*."

Her flexile little hands drop nervelessly down in her lap, her face turns full towards him with big, wide-open orbs of wonder.

"No!" she repeats incredulously, "you are surely joking! You do not mean that you are not going to marry Miss Meredith?"

"Yes, I do; I mean just that," he says emphatically. "And why do you think I am not in earnest—in sober, but not sad earnest?"

"Because Mrs. Lyster told me that you were engaged to her niece, and I fancied you were the last man in the world to

hold an engagement lightly. I do not see how you can retreat with honour," she says gravely, but she cannot restrain a strange feeling of satisfaction at her heart.

"You are quite right, I *am* the last man who would hold an engagement lightly. But, thank God, there is no engagement, not even the shadow of an engagement between Maude Meredith and myself—there is nothing from which I cannot retreat with both honour and self-respect."

"But Mrs. Lyster?"

"My aunt," he interrupts impetuously, "is anxious for such an arrangement, and, for a time, in the sheerest apathy, and an utter hopelessness of spirit, I felt as if I might gratify her—as if I might make up my mind to settle down, and be content with the mere husks of life. But this mood did not last very long. Something came and roused me from my unhealthy lethargy. I looked

round, and took breath as well as thought. After all, what are the base material goods of existence in comparison with freedom and self-respect? Therefore, I am here to-day a free man—free in spirit as well as in fact—free after a horrible bondage of twenty-eight years.”

Val gazes at him in wonderment. Surely a singular change sweeps over his features as he speaks. The listlessness has vanished from his face, the languor from his eyes. He looks like a man to whom life and hope and resolution have suddenly come. Unconsciously he throws back his shoulders and head, with a gesture that seems to her to be full of courage and exultation. He appears to thrill with the words he has uttered—and golden words they are, though so few heed them—“After all, what are the base material goods of existence in comparison with freedom and self-respect?”

“Once in every man’s life, I suppose,” he goes on, “he has to choose not only between God and Mammon, but also between Mammon and his higher self; and on that choice depends the whole course and meaning of his after life. For years past I have felt a hopeless sense of existence, pre-arranged, as it were, and fitted into a narrow groove, which seemed to crush all energy and manhood out of me. Before I could decide for myself with regard to what my life and career should be, my father died, leaving me nothing but a paltry pittance. Then my aunt, with whom I had always been a favourite, at once adopted me, with the openly avowed intention of making me in future her especial care.

“She certainly kept her word most generously, lavishing money on my education and my wants; but she laid a positive interdic-

tion on the one thing for which nature had fitted me—the pursuit of art.

“So I grew up, chafing a little against the restraint, but not so very much. In a certain sense, the world was before me, and its pleasures ready to be plucked if I willed it. No wonder the smothered flame within me gave only faint and fitful signs of its existence. Then came my blind, unreasoning passion for Gertrude Heneage—a passion which I thought filled every hour, and coloured every act of my life. Great Heavens! what an idiot I was! Looking at the woman now, I can in nowise understand my insane infatuation, or what enchantment existed for me in her commonest words and looks. However, I presume every man who has arrived at my age has passed through a similar period of folly, and looked back on it with unmitigated self-

scorn and pity. I think, however, that my folly must have been a degree or two more intense than other people's. I worshipped her, followed her, was her absolute slave for three years, and was treated—well, I have told you how I was treated. It was during this time that the art fever awoke in me again. If I married Gertrude, I knew I could expect nothing from Mrs. Lyster, so I went to Italy, and tested my capacity as an artist.

“Untaught as I was, I found that my talent exceeded all I had dared to hope. Artists of high position spoke to me words of encouragement, which it cheers me to remember even yet. Then in the flush of youthful hope and confidence I wrote a letter—*such* a letter—to Miss Heneage, painting my future all in rose colour, and praying, beseeching of her to wait—only to wait a little while, until I could conquer

fame and fortune. Of course having conquered these, I meant to lay them at her feet, &c., &c. Miss Heneage, a remarkably sensible woman of the nineteenth century, took no notice of my rhapsody, and the next news I heard was of her marriage to Philip Middleton."

His voice drops just a little over the last words. Lightly as he has spoken, who knows but that even yet the old pang stirs him, or if not the pang, the memory of it. It must indeed be a very tough and callous nature that does not flinch when the scar of an old wound is handled.

Just at this time the disk of the sun touches the horizon. He is glorious and majestic still, though a flimsy veil of white cloud enables them to look at his fiery countenance. He sinks gradually, gradually below the purple, faintly-defined line of hills, and when the very last glimpse of

his radiant face has gone, and the clouds above are catching his reflected splendour of amber and rose, Val says with a soft sigh,

“Our day has ended. It has been pleasant, has it not?”

“No day is ended while sunset yet remains to us,” Keith Fairfax answers; “but I must be taking you down soon, or you will be late for the ball to-night.”

“I do not think I care particularly for the ball,” she observes, in a low voice.

“You care for Mrs. Grundy, however, and I fear that worthy dame is already shaking her head over our long absence.”

“I don’t care for Mrs. Grundy a bit; but Mr. Harcourt will be very wroth. I promised faithfully to go early; and he was to fetch me.”

“Disappointment is an excellent thing for man,” is the quiet rejoinder. “It teaches

him his level, which Ainsworth Harcourt sadly needs to find. Well, let me finish my story (for it is not finished yet) in the few minutes that remain to us. You must not think that I made a fool of myself very long after the death of my hopes. Of course such a blow stuns a man for a time, but if his courage is of the right mettle, he soon recovers.

“But I found that I could not look on life exactly as I had looked on it before. Trifles ceased to amuse me; I felt the need of work, of some serious and definite aim in life—above all, I felt that longing which is only known to the born artist—that passionate fever of inspiration, which with a painter expresses itself in form and colour, just as with a poet it glows in grand thoughts and melodious verse. But the one thing that my aunt asked in return for all she had done for me, lavished on me,

was that I should not become a professional artist, a life which she regarded as a species of picturesque vagabondage, unrecognised by good society. Now I am quite well aware that many men, feeling all I felt, would have burst what they called the chains of obligation, and gone their way; but I could not do it. Those chains to me were very real and binding. I knew how much I was indebted to my aunt; I also knew that there was but one way I could acknowledge and repay the debt—it was by a sacrifice of my inclination. There were many people who called me weak, as well as mercenary, for making it, but I hope *you* understand now why I did so.”

“Yes,” Val says, looking at him with eyes full of that intelligent sympathy which De Quincey defines as “comprehension.” “I understand perfectly. I think it would have been very hard for any but a horribly

selfish nature to have acted otherwise."

He seizes her hand, a little, bare, grass-stained hand, and kisses it fervently.

"Thank you!" he says gratefully. "You cannot tell how glad I am to hear you say that! You don't know what happiness it gives me that *you* do not think I sold my liberty for an interested motive!"

"I am sure no one who knows you could think so," Val asserts bravely; but her cheeks are all aflame at his action. Let those who have heard of advanced flirtation forgive the girl her mild peccadillos when they see how she blushes at a kiss on her hand.

"I am not so sure of that. But no matter. My own conscience acquits me wholly, and that is, or ought to be, enough for any man. So I gave up my second great hope, and sank into a horrible listless apathy, which seemed to eat like rust into

my very soul. After a few months I went on the Continent, and lounged like a dissatisfied spirit over half the civilized world, plunged into dissipation, drank, gambled, spent money as though I had thousands instead of hundreds at my beck and command, and then pulled up in my mad career to face a self-contempt and utter weariness, that helped to sober me completely. Last winter Mrs. Lyster came to Nice, where I was, and brought Maude Meredith, whom I had known from a child. Then she told me that this was the wife she had selected for me. I was in a desperate mood, which inclined me to any desperate act; but still I could not bear with any philosophy the idea of linking myself for life to such a vapid piece of womanhood—one, too, who cared for me no more than I cared for her. I asked for time to consider the matter, and the result was that I decided to accept what

Fate offered. Why not? I thought. Love and ambition were both dead for me. What remained then but the mere outside of life? And if a man rejoiced in purple and fine linen, and possessed the wherewithal to fare sumptuously each day, he ought surely to be content. And it was in this mood that I was going to meet my fate when—when——”

His voice sinks, a different chord comes into it ; his eyes look out at her earnestly, passionately; his mouth quivers with emotion.

“ When I met *you*—and you saved me!”

“ *I!*”

She can say no more, for she feels what is coming, and the traitor blood rushes again to her face.

“ Yes, *you!*” he replies eagerly, watching the expression of her mobile features while he speaks. “ You did not guess it, perhaps,

yet you might have ! It was you who roused me out of myself—my fallen, crushed self. It was you who made me feel how sweet a thing womanhood could be ! You see those other two, Gertrude and Maude, had represented the sex to me for so long. My old reluctance came back on me with redoubled force, but still I hesitated, thinking of my obligation to my aunt, until now—*now* hesitation is at an end, for I know that I love you, and you only, and that, as God hears me, I will never marry any other woman !”

The passionate energy of his voice, as he tells her his heart history, rings out strangely on the silent scene, and Val quivers from head to foot with the start she gives, and the suppressed excitement, that makes her feel as if she had received an electric shock from a galvanic battery.

It occurs to her that this is a positive “declaration.” One of those things which

the heroines in her favourite novels always receive either with intense rapture or virtuous indignation—no intermediate state being known. Val has no personal experience of real declarations, save, indeed, in the case of Jack; but since he has been making them, off and on, ever since she was ten years of age, she has never been able to bring herself into a heroine-like mood for receiving them. These reflections pass like a flash of lightning through her brain, and also, it must be confessed, the thought that, if all declarations are like this one, they are too startling to be quite as pleasant as she fancied.

Meanwhile, the man who is beside her, hanging on her answer to learn his fate, watches her in perplexity and pain. Surprise is legibly written in her eyes. There is no coldness in her look, but love is absent from it. Is he, a drowning man, grasping

figuratively at a straw, to be denied life after all, he wonders, as he tries to dive beneath the fair surface of those exquisite features.

“Val!”—and the voice that for the first time speaks the name is very gentle—“I fear I have startled you. Did I not tell you that I dreaded to speak, lest by any chance I should mar the bright memory of to-day? But I could not let you go on thinking that I was to marry another woman. I could not bear to see other men striving to win you, without asking you to give me a chance as well. I know you do not love me now, but may I try to make you love me?”

He gazes at her with eyes that plead more even than his voice, and Val looks back at him shy and silent. All her coquetry and pretty audaciousness are flown. She trembles all over, and does not know what to

reply. She is conscious of neither extreme rapture nor proper indignation. She is only puzzled, like many another girl, uncertain of her own heart, flattered, touched, a little triumphant at having won this man; and, with it all, full of a misty, struggling sense of loyalty to Jack.

The glorious colour-splashed, sunset sky is tingeing with a deep flood of yellow the world outspread in such beauty at their feet, but neither of them notices it. They are wrapped in themselves. Both of them are absorbed in the issue between them, that supreme issue of man's and woman's life, on which depends more of the best interests of existence, both here and hereafter, then many pause to think. At last Val speaks, diffidently, her airs and graces (some cynical tongue at the Kursaal said,

“ Mincing she was as is a wanton colt,
Sweet as a flower, and upright as a bolt ”)

dispersed to the four winds of Heaven, her face white even to the lips, her hands cold as ice and twisting nervously together.

"I think you are perhaps mistaken—at least, I don't believe anybody here is trying to win me; and I cannot imagine what anybody anywhere wants with me. But of course that is a matter of taste. If you wish to try, I do not object; but Mrs. Lyster will never forgive it!"

"Never mind about Mrs. Lyster!" cries Keith, his features glowing with hope and smiles. "You and I are all alone here—let us speak only of ourselves!" He takes her two hands in his firm strong clasp, and gazes down wistfully into her beautiful face. "Oh! my darling, do you think you can ever learn to love me well enough to marry me. Remember, I am a poor man,

and that I must for many years, perhaps always, be a struggling one!"

Val looks at him a little doubtfully. Already she has been long enough in Vanity Fair to learn that poverty is not a pleasant thing, and that struggling is not conducive to an enjoyment of life. Despise her if you will, but answer if you can whether like considerations have not swayed you at certain critical moments of your lives. But to do her justice, she does not harp long on the temptations of Tophet or the flesh-pots of the Egyptians. Another remembrance, and a nobler, better one flashes across her.

"But you forget Jack," she falters. "I should act as badly and heartlessly as that Mrs. Middleton acted to you, if I threw him over. Poor old Jack! who has known me and loved me all my life, and I only saw *you* a few weeks ago."

Keith Fairfax loses heart at this, but he gulps down the expression of disappointment that rises to his lips. Bending lower, he looks into her eyes, and his arm steals round her. Val lets the arm rest there—in fact, she scarcely knows it is there in the turmoil of her feelings.

“I loved *you* the first day we met, sweet, though I did not guess it myself. Don’t compare yourself for one moment with that—*that woman!* The cases are not parallel at all. You have not, I am sure, vowed passionate love and devotion to the man of whom you speak, nor bound yourself by every tie of honour to be true to him, and him only.”

Val confesses she has not done that—on the contrary, she affirms she has behaved very badly and coldly to Jack. Upon this point Keith disagrees with her, and they are still arguing the matter *pro* and *con*, unmindful

of the deepening twilight around them, when suddenly she clasps his arm with genuine consternation on her face.

"There is some one coming up the hill. I hear footsteps plainly!" she exclaims—"don't you?"

He draws her nearer to him with one arm, and lays a hand over hers while he listens a moment.

"Yes," he says, quietly, "somebody is certainly coming up, but there is no need for alarm. Highwaymen are rare in these parts. It is getting late, however, and I must take you down."

She does not demur, and he assists her to her feet, while he still clasps her waist. For an instant they stand thus together, and he has a mind to press his lips on the silken tendrils of hair that the evening air lifts towards him, when a tall stalwart figure appears on the brow of the hill, and ap-

proaches them. Even in the partial light Val recognises it at once.

“Jack!” she cries; and, forgetful of Keith’s existence, she springs forward with outstretched hands.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TRIBUNAL OF MRS. GRUNDY.

“Nor do they trust their tongues alone,
But speak a language of their own;
Can read a nod, a shrug, a look,
Far better than a printed book,
Convey a libel in a frown,
And wink a reputation down.”

SWIFT.

JACK, positively Jack in flesh and blood, healthy, and substantial, and highly coloured, and not by any means an avenging wraith, as Val at first is inclined to believe.

Jack, certainly, but Jack without the genial, sunshiny countenance that is his best

attraction, without his beaming glances, his hearty manner, and his ringing voice. An expression of grave anxiety sits on his honest face, which, however, gives way to evident relief when he hears the first sound of the familiar, beloved tones, that are the honey and roses of his existence.

In the twinkling of an eye the two hands that Keith Fairfax so tenderly clasped are placed in the strong, clinging grasp of Val's half-pledged husband, and Jack is murmuring disconnectedly how glad, oh! how very glad he is to see her again.

She returns this assurance with as much coherence and sincerity as can possibly be expected. Then she inquires, with a surprise not unnatural, when he reached Spa, and how he comes to be in such a place as this hill-top, and at such an hour.

"I arrived about two o'clock to-day," he answers, still flurried in speech, "and I

have been waiting and watching for you ever since !”

He says all this without any hesitation, and at his words Keith Fairfax winces. It is hard that, in the first golden hour of romance his life has known for years, this healthy, strapping young giant should put in an appearance suddenly, as though sent up at the wrong situation on a stage trap. Keith has a fairly good temper, a temper slow to anger, but now he sets his teeth hard, and grinds his heel impotently on the ground, as he listens perforce to his rival's frank confessions.

“At last,” Jack goes on, pathetically, “as night was plainly drawing on, and there was still no sign of you, I could restrain my uneasiness no longer, and your father agreed with me that some search ought to be made. But never mind, now that I *have* found you, Val !”

He has the good taste not to call her "Val, darling," as he has often done before, but his strong voice thrills and softens so much that the very sound of it is a caress.

"Papa's uneasiness has suddenly developed itself, then?" she answers. "I am sure, if you had not been there to suggest anxiety to him, he would not have cared, or, in fact, scarcely known if I ever came back at all. It is such a comfort to have a philosophical father. He never worries one, and there's nothing half so sweet in life as following one's own bent. But he might have had more regard for *your* safety, Jack, than to allow you to come out among strange hills and places all alone. You might easily have got lost."

Jack laughs out brightly at this. Anxiety, jealousy—everything is forgotten by him in the exquisite pleasure of hearing Val's gay petulance once more.

"Not much fear of *my* being lost," he affirms confidently, casting an eye over his own long length, as though he fancied he was too big to lose. "But surely *you* must have wandered out of your road to have been up here so late?"

"No," she replies frankly, "we did not lose our way. Mr. Fairfax knows too much of this place for *that*. By the way, I have not introduced you. Mr. Fairfax, this is my——" She stops short, and grows crimson under the friendly shadow of the dusk as she remembers all she has said. "This is Mr. Rivers," she half stammers.

The two measure each other quickly from head to foot, then say they are happy to make acquaintance, and shake hands with a semblance of cordiality which, slight as it is (it would hardly deceive a child), yet does them both credit.

Who has not seen men exchange hand-

clasps sometimes when they would infinitely rather have fought a war to the teeth, and been amused by the restrained pugnacity of manner, at the grim, business-like way in which the conventional ceremony is accomplished?

Val has a very keen sense of humour, and she is tickled now by this enacted farce, although she is considerably annoyed as well. Could anything have been more *mal à propos* than this meeting? is the question that she asks herself impatiently, as she glances from one to the other of her companions.

"Since papa is so very uneasy," she remarks, with a tinge of irony in her voice, "we had better go home as soon as possible. See how all the myriad lights are beginning to gleam all along the Avenue Marteau and the town. No. Many thanks, Mr. Fairfax. I do not need any assistance.

Jack, how did you leave them all at Fern-lee?"

While Jack answers this question in detail, Keith marches on in front, the path being too narrow to admit of three abreast, and he feels more chafed and hurt than is really at all reasonable. He catches fragments of the conversation that is going on behind him,—the familiar allusions, the constantly-recurring names of Plant and Cissy and Gus, the anxious inquiries about horses and dogs and birds,—and he realises, with a painful, startling vividness, how much of the association of the past, of her childhood, and her home, are embodied for Val in this man, with whom she chatters unceasingly and unreservedly.

After a while the evening grows darker, and the way a shade rougher.

"Val, take my arm, *do!*"

Jack pleads. He is longing to touch her,

even if it is only the hem of her garment. It is so long since he has been near her—his life's delight and torment. But she refuses. Having abjured Keith's assistance, she feels an obligation to stumble along by herself in extreme discomfort. This is the first unpleasant consequence of having *two* lovers at one time, and instinct warns her that it will not be the last.

Luckily she escapes mishap—she neither breaks her neck nor sprains her ankle; and having lightened the road by a few constrained attempts at general conversation, they at last find themselves at the foot of the hill. They walk down the promenade, Val momentarily more oppressed by a sense of guilt. She hears the clock strike nine, and turns to Keith.

"I do hope they have all gone to the Rooms, don't you?" she says, in a nervous voice.

The hope is destined to be disappointed. Just before the chalet, Mrs. Grundy has elected to hold her tribunal, which is composed of Mrs. Lyster, Miss Meredith, and Mr. Egerton. When the two culprits, escorted by Jack, who in the dim light may easily pass for a policeman, ascend the steps, the tribunal receives them in austere silence.

"Papa, you see we have got back safe and sound at last," Val says airily, with a supreme effort, for her light tone is forced, and inwardly she quakes.

"It is fortunate that Mr. Rivers found you and *brought* you back. I do not suppose it would have occurred to either of you that it was proper and advisable to return, if he had not gone and reminded you," remarks Mrs. Lyster, with an uplifting of her shaggy brows, and a curt, sardonic laugh.

"Oh, indeed it would!" cries the

female prisoner at the bar. "We were just starting down the hill when Jack met us. Were we not, Jack?"

"I am very sorry that the delay was my fault," Mr. Fairfax puts in. "I persuaded Miss Egerton, instead of coming back to dinner, to have an Arcadian meal at a *café* on the hill. We forgot that you would naturally be very uneasy about our absence," he adds, turning to the philosopher.

"Well, I have not been exactly uneasy," responds that gentleman, quietly. "I was fully occupied reading, for there was more matter than usual in to-day's paper. I did not, in fact, remark the time until Rivers reminded me. But, Val, I think that, in deference to custom and prejudice, it might have been as well for you to have returned before." And he turns away coldly.

"No doubt," Miss Meredith observes with a languid smile, "that the Arcadian meal

was so alluring, you could not make up your minds to leave it. Probably there were Arcadian attractions of other kinds as well."

Upon this Val's hot temper flies out.

"Yes, there were plenty of Arcadian attractions," she retorts—"there were fresh air and quietude, and no ill-natured, spiteful people about. You all seem to think we have been guilty of something dreadful, but I see no harm in it; and it is just a chance we are so late."

"Of course you do not see any harm in it, my dear. Young people seldom see any harm in transgressing the rules of propriety, but old ones perceive that it is safest to keep within them. No harm, indeed, in being alone with a man in the woods, and at such an hour! Pouf! the situation was simply scandalous, and Keith ought to have known better than to have made you such

food for chatter! But some men are so wanting!—so wanting! Mr. Egerton, are you going to the Kursaal this evening? No. Then, Maude, come along.”

So the tribunal gathers its virtuous robes around it and departs, Maude sweeping haughtily past Keith, who still stands on the steps. As we know well, she has not the faintest sentiment of love for him, but she is none the less deeply incensed that he, whom the world in general considers her own particular property, should care to flirt even with anyone else.

“Are they not *hateful*?” Val says candidly, as she watches the two disappear across the Place. “I don’t think I ever knew people more disagreeable than they are. Jack, my dear boy, this is a very poor welcome for you. Pray don’t fancy that such interesting amusements go on every day.”

"Oh! it does not in the least matter about me," he replies heartily; "but I am sorry you should have got into such hot water, Val."

"I think it is cold instead of hot water. Don't you feel chilled to the backbone, Mr. Fairfax?"

"I feel that I have been very seriously to blame," Keith says gravely; "and I must beg your forgiveness. If I had not persuaded you to linger up there, you would have escaped this unpleasantness."

"And missed a lovely day—nonsense!" she cries, with quick defiance. "Who cares for unpleasantness? But I *do* care for my toilette, and I must rush and make it. *Au revoir*, dear Jack, until we meet at the Kursaal."

She waves her hand, and disappears within the portal before Jack can say a word; and he has so many words ready on

the tip of his tongue. He has not seen her either for one moment alone !

Keith cannot help feeling a slight sentiment of compassion as he marks the poor fellow, standing gazing blankly at the closed door, and he says kindly,

"Don't you think we had better go to some restaurant, and get something to eat, before we change our dress?"

"I thought of waiting here until Val was ready," Jack answers simply, and he looks just like the sort of steadfast, faithful creature that would sit unrepiningly on the door-step all night to catch a glimpse of anyone he loved.

The other man, standing alongside, his head erect, a proud yet harassed expression on his features, laughs. A man can laugh when he is irritated, jealous, thoroughly out of sorts, you know !

"Miss Egerton will certainly not be ready

for an hour. She generally lingers over her toilette for that time."

"Still I can wait—I shouldn't wish to hurry her—I would rather that she pleased herself, but when she *is* ready, she will not be at a loss for an escort."

Keith Fairfax laughs again. This time it is a short, bitter laugh, which he cannot restrain. The idea of Val, the queen of the hour, being at a loss for an escort! He feels rather sorry even for the poor young fellow whose blissful ignorance on the subject of Miss Egerton's Spa life he is forced to enlighten; for it is kinder to enlighten him than to let him be startled into knowledge.

"Your services as escort duty may be dispensed with, I fancy. Mr. Harcourt has promised Miss Egerton that he shall call for her at half-past ten this evening, and take her to the Rooms. She is very good, and gives us all a turn about."

This last item of information crushes poor love-sick Jack. Down he goes, mentally, into an unreasoning but dense darkness. Without any further attempt at demur or delay, he descends the steps, and walks wearily across to the Hôtel de Portugal, where he has taken up his head-quarters.

And this is what he has come for all the way to Spa—to find Val so utterly engrossed with other men that it is scarcely practicable to obtain the smallest word with her!

When, in the course of another hour, Ainsworth Harcourt saunters over to the chalet, he has to bring patience to his aid as he sits on the star-lit steps waiting for Val. He has heard—everyone who knows her has heard—of her curious escapade (to use the mildest term) of to-day, and he is not, therefore, surprised that she is not awaiting him in full toilette for

the dance. He naturally expected to be kept waiting, and communes with himself—it is to be hoped profitably—while doing so.

When she *does* come out, there is no shyness or shrinking about her; no blush mantles on her fair cheek, and her manner is as easy and self-possessed as a woman's of treble her age.

"I am sorry to be late," she says, carelessly, "but you know, perhaps, that Mr. Fairfax and I are great delinquents, and in disgrace with everybody. We have been sat in judgment on, and condemned for scandalous behaviour. After such heinous conduct, exemplary punctuality can hardly be expected."

"Yes, I have heard all about it," he answers, with an unpleasant laugh—there is the ghost of a scowl on his handsome brow, and his blue eyes shine "steely" under

the stars—"and you certainly deserve to be in disgrace, considering the manner in which you have treated your 'friends, lovers, and countrymen.' Of course, we all know '*Honi soit qui mal y pense*,' but long *tête-à-têtes* on the hill-tops are not the thing. As for Fairfax, he may count himself lucky if he is not challenged by a score of jealous men, who would willingly tear him limb from limb. Popular indignation was at fierce heat this afternoon in the roulette room, and there was some talk of an exploring expedition, when some one hinted that a new arrival—a young Goliath, fiery and desperate, and who had known you all the days of your misguided youth—had sallied forth, staff in hand, to recover the wandering lamb, that had got into the fold of some black sheep or other."

"Really!" Val says with a curling lip. She does not half relish the tone of mingled

irony and censure that her companion has chosen to take up. "Poor dear old Jack! I am afraid he would scarcely recognise himself in the character for which he has been cast! More likely he thought I had been devoured by wolves and came to pick up the precious fragments. I *have* known him ever since I cut my first teeth, and—and I like him a thousand times better than anyone, I think!"

She hurls him a defiant look as she says this, but Ainsworth Harcourt is not only too much of an *enfant gâté* of women to be a martyr to jealousy, but he is also too worldly to be jealous of "Jack." Jack is very small fry in his estimation, and the stalwart Devonshire farmer's proportions of six feet two in his socks, and forty-four inches across his chest, have no weight with him. "Quantity," he mutters to himself—"lots of it, but as to quality!" a sneer expresses the rest.

"You *don't* think you like him better than anyone else," he says, in a positive and assured tone.

"Yes—but I do ! But tell me why you and Miss Meredith did not follow us up to-day. You can't think what delicious bread and milk—beautiful home-made bread, and milk fresh from the cow—you missed !"

"Well, you see that you and Fairfax are better fitted for Chloe and Strephon than Miss Meredith and myself. The fair Maude has not your power of endurance. She cannot climb mountains with the agility of a chamois all day, and then dance like a fairy all night. Are you not dreadfully tired ? I cannot possibly imagine that you are not done to death !"

"I am not tired in the least, not any more than if I had merely strolled through the Artist's Walk, nor half as much as if I had walked there with *some* people !" she remarks quietly.

"I cannot, of course, be *some* people," is his cool response, while he looks as serene and complacent as usual. When they enter the *Salle de Danse*, the first quadrille is long over, as also the first mazurka and galop, and the waltz "Mon Premier Amour" is playing.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

“O jealousy!

Thou ugliest fiend of hell! thy deadly venom
Preys upon my vitals, turns the healthful hue
Of my fresh cheek to haggard sallowness,
And drinks my spirit up.”

HANNAH MORE.

JACK, who has been straining his eyes until they ache in search of Val, catches his first glimpse of her floating round the room on Ainsworth Harcourt's arm. As he looks, a fierce deadly pang of jealousy shoots through the poor fellow's heart. Val is so unspeakably lovely! Even among the sweet-featured, white-shouldered, diaphan-

ous-clad houris that fill the ball-room, a stranger would single her out for beauty, and then she seems, all of a sudden, to be elevated ever so far out of his reach.

Not exactly in a social point of view, for Jack Rivers knows himself and feels himself to be a true gentleman. But in that *je ne sais quoi* of social tone, that curious freemasonry of good society that rests in such trivialities as subtle looks and accents. Then Jack, whose nature is too noble to harbour pettiness of any kind, cannot help seeing, acknowledging, and, in fact, never wishing to deny for a moment, the good looks, ease, and grace of the man with whom Val is dancing, whose arm enclasps her slender waist, whose breath fans her cheek, whose hand presses hers, and against whose breast her russet-brown tresses appear to rest—a man who might easily stand for the fairy Prince of whom she has so often gaily

prattled while they sauntered through the flowery, innocent Devonshire lanes.

It begins to dawn on him that perhaps he would have been infinitely wiser if he had remained in flowery, innocent Devonshire. At least he is sure that there is no great degree of gratification to be derived in watching, with aching eyeballs, and a big lump of misery on his soul, the slim, fairy-like proportions of Val's figure, the delicious Greek profile, the brown, gold-flecked curls, clustering on the gleaming neck, the tiny pearl-kidded hand lying on Mr. Harcourt's shoulder, when all these manifold charms are for other men, and not for him.

Never for him, he thinks, with a sharp stab, and he meditates slipping out of this scene of revelry into the darkness without, which will be far more in consonance with his own miserable feelings. But Val is not so much engrossed in either her devotion to

Terpsichorean delights, or in her handsome, fascinating partner, but that, with the Argus-eyed quickness which distinguishes feminine vision under such circumstances, she remarks the tall figure in a corner, the honest, wistful face watching her evolutions, the pallor on the usually healthy cheek, and reads all that poor Jack is thinking and suffering, as though his thoughts and feelings were legibly printed on his countenance.

When the waltz is over, she beckons him to her, and he comes at once at her bidding, like a faithful spaniel, no matter whether kicks or caresses are his portion; and Val, quietly dismissing Ainsworth Harcourt, takes his arm.

"My dear boy," she says, with the familiar, affectionate manner that always makes his heart leap with gladness, like "troutlets in a stream," "why do you look so pale, and as if melancholy had mark-

ed you for her own? Are you not aware that you are infringing the laws of society, that nobody ever thinks of looking melancholy at Spa? It is against the rules and regulations of the place. If you wanted to indulge in the luxury of grief, you should have stayed at home. Don't you know anybody here? It is forlorn not to know anyone. I will introduce you to Mr. Harcourt, and *he* will be very pleased to introduce you to every pretty girl in the room."

"Much obliged, I am sure," cries Jack, "but I won't trouble Mr. What's-his-name. I know *you*, and I have not the slightest desire to extend my acquaintances."

"But it will be most frightfully slow for you," she remonstrates, with painful disinterestedness. "Of course you know I cannot talk to you or dance with you all the time. By the way, are you going to ask me for the next lancers? If so, you had better

make haste, before anybody else comes. Let me tell you that I never lack partners."

"I should think not, indeed," Jack remarks, staring at her with all his soul in his eyes, and speaking rather ruefully. He is almost wishing that she was plain, so that other men might not care to regard her. He dances the set with her, and directly it is finished, he is cast adrift once more. For Val, as she asserts, has certainly no paucity of attention—not for five minutes is she allowed to sit under her *chaperon's* wing, without some man coming up to claim her hand. She dances, however, much oftener with Ainsworth Harcourt than anyone else. Jack notes this fact with flushed cheeks and kindling eyes, and so does Keith Fairfax.

The latter is not in the ball-room to-night. Somehow, after that afternoon on the hill-top, he does not relish the glare and the

vanity and society of the *salle*, but he cannot keep himself long from looking on the face that has captivated him, so, after smoking a post-prandial cigar, he peers through the glass-doors of the gambling saloon, and is rewarded for his trouble by seeing Val—but Val in conjunction always with Ainsworth Harcourt's blond beauty.

“What an egregious fool—what an insane, shallow-brained ass he has been!” This is the bent of his reflections, as he stands, straining his pupils, while his pulses are beating like sledge-hammers.

To fancy for a moment that this girl, in the magnificence of her loveliness, in the freshness of her youth, in the exuberance of her coquetry, could possibly be expected to turn away from all the bright and substantial prizes that were to be won by such rare gifts of nature as she possessed, to share the miserable poverty, the continuous struggle

with fortune, which were all he had to offer! Surely, surely, when he dared to dream such a thing, he was even a more insensate fool than when he poured out his youthful heart like water at Gertrude Heneage's feet!

Meanwhile, little as he guesses it, Val is perfectly aware of his absence, and has despatched more than one flashing glance around the big room in search of him. The truth is that Val's heart is a perfect enigma to herself. Usually men are remarkably unreasonable in expecting women to read those wayward and inscrutable things called hearts, "off hand." But enigma though it be, it thrills when she remembers every now and then Keith's words and tones on that Summer's afternoon.

It is no good to disguise that Val is terribly faulty. There is nothing of the perfection of womanhood about her, or of that especial exception from folly and vice with

which heroines are ordinarily painted. Val is full of vanity and an innocent egotism, full of craving for adulation, open to flattery, willing to flirt, loth to lose even the ugliest and most uninteresting of her worshippers, pleased at any conquest that she makes, and she experiences an agreeable sense of triumph over those two women of whom Keithspoke—over the fair, patronising prototype of Lady Clara Vere de Vere; over the lustrous-eyed Spanish beauty, whose dark glance she meets now and then.

And, after all, why should women not be allowed a pardonable sense of triumph in such victories as these? Remember how deeply implanted in nature is the desire to excel, which we *call* ambition and emulation. Then remember also that in the many fields which man rejoices in for the exercise of this feeling, woman has no place. In her own especial realm, therefore—the great

realm of hearts—forgive her that she feels sometimes a conqueror's pride, and sometimes a conqueror's cruelty !

CHAPTER XI.

LISTEN TO YOUR OWN HEART.

“Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs,
Being purged, a fire sparkling in lover’s eyes;
Being vexed, a sea nourished with lovers’ tears.
What is it else?—a madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.”

SHAKESPEARE.

THE clock strikes the quarter to midnight when Keith Fairfax, who has been promenading the Place de Pouhon, throws away impatiently the remnant of his cigar, and wends his steps to the Kursaal, for he remembers that his aunt bade him come for her at this hour. Mrs. Lyster has not been in the ball-room to-night, but has been

playing roulette, which she finds more entertaining than *chaperonage*; and the natural unamiability of her temper is not improved by the steady ill-luck that has pursued her for three consecutive hours. No matter what she has backed, fortune has favoured the opposite chance; and there is no time for retrieving, since the tables are closing as Keith comes to her side.

"I thought you had forgotten me," she says to him, snappishly. "I suppose you have been dancing with that little flirt, and could not be expected to remember the existence of an old woman."

"I have not been in the ball-room this evening," he answers, quietly. "My attire would tell you that."

She glances at him, sees that he is in his morning dress, and mollifies a little.

"Where is Maude? I told her to meet me here a little before twelve," she says, as

they pause in the vestibule at the head of the staircase. "Who is *she* flirting with, I wonder? In all my life I have never known such a place as this for flirtation—never! Old men seem as big fools as young ones; and if they could catch at the slightest sign of encouragement, I am not sure but that the old women would be as bad!"

"I thought Maude was too discreet to flirt," Keith observes, carelessly. "Glancing into the room not long ago, I saw her dancing the *trois temps* with that heavy, red-haired German baron, whose legs look so unaccountably in the way when he waltzes. Beyond this, I know nothing of her movements."

"You *should* know something about them, then!" cries Mrs. Lyster, irritably. "It is very far from gentlemanly, to speak of nothing else, the manner in which you neglect her, *under the circumstances*. If you

had the least regard for my wishes, you would act differently—but there, you openly show that you have none, so it is useless for me to say a word.”

If by any means she expects a disclaimer—an assurance that he *does* regard or intend regarding her wishes—she is doomed to disappointment.

Mr. Fairfax feels that the time to assert his independence has arrived; and as a primary step towards doing so, he maintains an utter silence and a rigid reserve. So they proceed, Mrs. Lyster hobbling in angry dignity; but instead of descending the stairs as he surmised, she turns to the left and walks up the long side corridor. They pass several couples resting comfortably on the red velvet settees, but to whom they pay no attention. Then Mrs. Lyster's sharp eyes penetrate a corner, and she walks up to it and shakes her crutch.

"Aha! here you are again, are you?" she exclaims dryly. "Not content with a whole day's outing, you must pass the evening in a long dimly-lighted corridor. You are going on at a fine rate—a very fine rate indeed! May I ask where you mean to end?"

"I don't mean to end anywhere," Val cries indignantly, and her black eyes flash angrily, "and I have not been in this corridor more than five minutes. Mr. Harcourt will tell you that, for I have just finished the last quadrille with him."

"I have not the least doubt of it," is the cynical reply. "And since you do not mean to end anywhere, I presume you purpose continuing your present amusement indefinitely. So good night."

She hobbles on again, saying in an audible tone as she goes—

"It would indeed be hard, if one searched

over the globe, to find any creature more thoroughly spoiled than that girl. I certainly prophesied that her head would be turned, but that it would ever be turned to half such an extent as it is I never imagined."

"I cannot see that Miss Egerton is particularly spoilt," replies Keith coldly. He is dreadfully irritated himself with Val—reckless, flirting Val—irritated that she should be ensconced in a dim corner with Ainsworth Harcourt of all people. But he has quite enough justice and clemency in his composition to recollect her youth, and he still feels that she is *the* woman among all women to him.

"I suppose you cannot see it," his aunt observes sarcastically, "having helped to bring about the result, it would be strange if you did not admire it even. But it is a great pity for the girl herself—a dreadful

pity. She had much better go home and marry that healthy-looking yeoman, who has got more love for her than brains about him. Men, as a rule—at least, men worth marrying, who have self-respect, and whom one can respect—don't like fast women for wives."

"I really don't think it is possible to stigmatise Miss Egerton as 'fast,' whatever that odious and comprehensive term may be supposed to mean," answers Keith hastily; his whole blood is up in Val's defence, and he feels hot and cold as he thinks of the way in which she is maligned. "She is fond of pleasure and admiration, but that is surely natural enough; and pardon me when I say that you, more than anyone, have encouraged her in liking both. As for her manners or her character standing one moment in the way of her finding a husband, I cannot of course answer for other

men ; but *I* should be the happiest man alive if she would marry me."

" Keith !"

Mrs. Lyster literally gasps. She drops his arm, and stands still (they are half-way to the chalet). Leaning heavily on her crutch, she appears to draw her breath with difficulty for a moment.

" Keith, are you mad ?" she asks, with a quick, sharp voice, " or are you only jesting ?"

" I am neither mad nor jesting," he answers, quietly and steadily enough to prove that he is sane, and far from inclined to pleasantry ; " and when we reach home, I will tell you all about it. This is scarcely a place for conversing in," he adds, pointing to half-a-dozen idlers who are occupying chairs on the Place, and admiring the moon.

Mrs. Lyster takes the arm he offers—

takes it simply, because she knows that she cannot dispense with its aid—and they proceed. When they arrive at the chalet, she is too much excited to call for Lisette's services, and seating herself, she clasps her strong bony fingers together, and fixes her small light eyes full on her nephew's face.

Nothing daunted by the stare—for somehow Keith experiences an unwonted courage—he begins at once to explain frankly and dispassionately his feelings and intentions. Not even an expression of sardonic bitterness on the *vis-à-vis* lips deters him from speaking. When he finishes—when he has announced, in a cold and deliberate voice, that he has arrived at his ultimatum, and that he can never marry Maude Meredith—when, in a warmer and more passionate tone, he has declared that he will, if possible, marry Miss Egerton, and that he has resolved to adopt art as his profession,

Mrs. Lyster answers, in a harder, sterner voice than he has ever heard drop from her mouth before for the years and years during which her roof has been his home—

“If you have finally and definitely made up your mind to this course of action, I shall waste no words on you, but bear the bitter, most bitter disappointment you have provided for me as well as I can. I shall not pretend to say that I forgive you, for I don’t, and never will. I only *do* say that, if you persist in such a course, I shall wash my hands of you for evermore, and that I hope with all my soul that you will live to see and repent of your desperate folly, as you deserve to do !”

These last words, vindictive, resolute, ring out on the quiet little room almost like a malediction from the old withered lips, and Keith Fairfax, in spite of himself, shudders inwardly, believing it to be an ill

omen. It is to be hoped that Byron was right when he wrote, "A curse is like a cloud—it passes." At any rate, Keith does not attempt to remonstrate or palliate in any way; this, he knows, is her decision—her positive, irrefragable decision—and, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, it is sealed and signed. Mrs. Lyster is a remarkably stubborn woman; she calls that stubbornness "pride," and likens herself complacently to Lucifer in the feeling. It is certain that she has never been known to retreat or soften.

Keith marks in every line of her face, and hears in every tone of her voice, the keen bitterness of the disappointment his avowal has dealt her. Seeing this, hearing this, and remembering with a vivid sense of gratitude, which is rare in most men, all he owes her—recollecting her rough, but unwavering affection to him, her lavish libe-

rality towards him, even when she has been most fitful and capricious in her dealings with others, a sense of remorse seizes him.

People who do not readily feel kindness cannot tell how deeply it touches those who do—cannot tell how a refined and generous nature is affected by obligation which another would barely regard. But for pretty Val, who has fairly bewitched him, Keith might yield again as he has yielded before—might sacrifice his life and all his happiness and its independence, as he has already sacrificed the very best years of his manhood, but the thought of Val keeps him firm. He has little, very little hope of winning her, but he feels that not for worlds could he resign that hope, though it lies in a nutshell. Neither can he for one moment entertain the idea of marrying anyone else but Val. He shrinks at the thought of any other woman on the face of the earth. He is in

love—madly, desperately in love, and this time Socrates' theory that beauty is a short-lived tyranny is a wrong one. Val's influence over this man is for all time. When he replies to his aunt, it is not to retract one iota of what he has already said.

“I should be glad to hear you wish me well, though, of course, I can hardly expect it,” he tells her gently. “I know too well how severely you look on my resolutions. I can, however, with all my heart, wish *you* well, and express my sincerest hopes that you may find—not a more grateful, but a more docile subject for your kindness. Don't think that I expect anything from you in any way or at any time, and do not misinterpret me when I say I can never forget all that you have done for me, and that I shall think of you with the utmost affection as long as I live!”

“Bah! who cares for gratitude or affec-

tion without proof?" she says harshly. "Words, when they are unsupported by deeds, are literally worth nothing; they are as light as air, and touch me as little! There, you may go; I have heard enough—more than enough, Heaven knows!"

She waves her hand with an imperious gesture towards the door, and he, having no alternative, passes out.

On the steps he pauses a moment, lifting his hat that the summer wind may cool his hot forehead. He is uncertain what to do or where to betake himself. Then he goes round to the side of the chalet, where the Egertons' rooms are situated, and sits down in a narrow verandah that gives out on a slip of garden.

It seems to him as though his heart would burst if he cannot secure a word with Val before the night is over, and he knows that she must soon be coming home. Already

he can see a stream of people pouring down the street from the Redoute. Ainsworth Harcourt will escort her, of course, but Keith determines to outstay him. It may be possible to get one word, and for that word he feels that he could wait till doomsday.

The moon has sunk behind a bank of clouds, but a myriad stars gleam downwards. A superb passion flower drapes the verandah, concealing him as he sits. He does not light his cigar, counting the moments as they fly by, and thus there is no sign of his presence when at length Val and Ainsworth Harcourt approach. Despite the partial light, Keith recognises them before they reach the chalet, and is impressed, not cheerfully certainly, by the fact that it would scarcely be possible for two people to walk more slowly than these two. They appear to lag at every step—walking, in truth, is

a term scarcely applicable to their mode of progression, they simply creep, and a pair of tortoises would easily beat them in a race.

When they reach the steps, they halt, and *ce cher* Harcourt, as the Belgian women call him, speaks in a low and distinct and remarkably earnest voice, which does not at all resemble his usual light and ringing accents.

“Now that I think you understand everything, I do hope that you will not do me such dire injustice again. The lady of whom you have spoken is less than nothing to me. You ought to have seen that, *felt* that long ago. But we may put all this aside. I have heard some very important news to-night, which may affect my future prospects deeply, and I *must* speak to you to-morrow early. Will you come out and take a stroll as soon after breakfast as possible? I shall

be so impatient until I see you ; and I promise, on my honour, not to take you up a hill and keep you there all day."

Val laughs—her little low rippling laugh, which she learnt Heaven knows where. It is a laugh that is musical, yet genuine, full of refined cadence, and yet replete with rustic heartiness. But at this moment she has a disadvantage in this laughter. Keith Fairfax hears the soft, delicious merriment, and realises—for the first time, perhaps—that she laughs for other men precisely as she does for him.

"Oh ! yes," she says, "I will walk with you gladly after breakfast, though I cannot possibly imagine what you can have to say of such vital importance to me. If it is a secret, let me tell you that I never kept one in my life, and so yours wouldn't be safe. But you need not have pledged yourself about the hill. One day of that, with its

consequences, has been quite enough for me."

If she could guess the cruel thrust her careless words give to the throbbing heart a few paces from her, she would be honestly penitent for them.

"I have not forgiven Fairfax yet for treating you so atrociously," Mr. Harcourt observes, tenderly. "You look just like the loveliest white lily in this starlight! How tired you must be!"

"Yes, I am rather." And Val opens her mouth and gives a yawn under the shadow of her fan, "so I must really beg of you to say good night. I shall be under that tree to-morrow morning at eleven."

"I shall be there without fail. *Good night.*"

Something suspiciously like the fervent kissing of a hand takes place, and it is to be feared that Miss Egerton's training in flirta-

tion is progressing very rapidly. Ainsworth Harcourt saunters away, and Val slowly ascends the steps, humming a few bars of the "Blue Danube." She starts visibly and violently when she sees Keith, who advances out of his hiding-place to meet her.

"I beg your pardon," he mutters, in a low and constrained voice—very chilly, very "far off" it sounds to her, "I did not, I assure you, mean to overhear Mr. Harcourt's tender farewell. I sat down in the verandah, intending to wait until you came, and to ask you to walk with me to-morrow morning, but of course I cannot interfere with the appointment that you have just made. Perhaps, too, since to-day's excursion has been enough, and more than enough for you, it would be useless to ask you to spend another hour in my society."

Oh, how dreadfully pained his voice grows as he speaks—how hard he struggles with

the falter that comes to it—and how heartily he thanks Providence that, in the shade of the passion flower, she cannot see the quivering lip that wounded feeling has caused.

“When I said it had been enough, I did not mean that it had been unpleasant,” Val answers, a little shyly, “I was only alluding to the disagreeable things that had been said. I should like, above all things, to walk with you to-morrow, if I had not unfortunately promised Mr. Harcourt. But you know, of course, all that was said.”

“Yes, I know,” Keith says, with a tinge of not unnatural but certainly rather unreasonable bitterness in his tone. “I could not venture, of course, to put my claim in competition with *his*; but I trust that, when you have listened to the important communication he has to make, you will grant me a few moments in which we can

“speak together quietly and uninterruptedly.”

“As many moments as you like,” she replies, glancing up at him with a smile, the sweetness of which he feels rather than sees. Val scarcely understands the sudden change that has come over him; but somehow her own heart appears to soften, and she longs to “make up with him,” as children say.

“I shall see you as soon as possible, then,” he says, in a quick, nervous manner, “and, meanwhile, let me entreat of you to think—to think seriously over what I said to you this afternoon. It is but a poor plea to speak of myself, of how madly I love you, and how desperately I long for you, my darling!—my darling! Yet if you *could* in any way realise it! However, you must choose as your own heart dictates, only, for God’s sake, Val, listen only to your heart! Don’t let yourself be swayed by any

fear of giving pain, or by any tie of old associations."

"Yes!" says the philosopher's voice, speaking at a little distance, with meditative slowness. "I am rather inclined to agree with you on the more salient points. I am opposed to Darwin, don't you know; but if it were possible to believe that we *were* monkeys——"

"Oh!" cries Val, apprehensively, "here is papa—please—please go! I don't want him to say anything severe or unpleasant to-night, I believe it would make me cry."

Thus adjured in plaintive accents, Keith goes, mournfully conscious that his departure is a decided relief to her.

"Good night, and Heaven bless you!" he murmurs, wringing her hand.

Then he walks rapidly away into the dusk, without being perceived by the philosopher's dreamy eyes, while Val darts into the

châlet. Her room is at the further side; entering it, she closes the door, and feels safe. Her first move is to sink into a chair and draw a deep breath of satisfaction that she is alone, the next is to strike a match, and light her candles. Hardly has she done this, when, lo and behold! on the toilette-table before her, lies a note, addressed in those remarkable hieroglyphics at which she has laughed often when Jack has been in a *cacoëthes scribendi* mood. Val glances wistfully round the room, as if mutely appealing against this persecution.

"I really thought I had done with them all for to-night," she murmurs plaintively, dropping wearily once more into her chair. It is impossible for her not to open the note, however, and so she does so after a minute or two.

"DEAREST VAL,

"I am so thoroughly miserable,

that I cannot help writing a few lines to you. I have been watching you all the evening, surrounded by other men, and I have not succeeded in exchanging a dozen sentences with you. It is very hard !”

She stops reading, and throws herself impatiently with a thud against the chair back. In the indignation of her feelings, however, she forgets the hurt she receives.

“How absurdly unreasonable some people are !” she says angrily. “What *do* they expect ?”

Then she takes up the document, and goes ahead once more—

“I cannot help feeling utterly wretched, since I love you so very much, and I have come so far to see you.” (“Did I ask him to come ?”) “I don’t want to reproach you—I know it is quite natural that all the world should admire you.”

Here Val rises and walks up to the looking-glass, and glances at her own features before she continues the perusal of this simple *billet-doux*.

“If I am to see you at all, it must be through your making an effort in my behalf. Will you do this, dear, dearest Val? I don’t want to be unreasonable, but if you will take a short stroll with me to-morrow morning” (“Good heavens! I ought to have three pair of legs, at least!”), “I should indeed be grateful. I write this to-night because I want to be sure of asking you before anyone else can. Val, try to love me just a little, and believe that nobody in the wide, wide world can love you better than your devoted

“JACK.”

Val drops this eloquent epistle on the table, and stares at it fixedly for a while, with her chin on her hand. Then she takes

it and deliberately holds it in the flame of the candle, until poor Jack's heart-effort crumbles into ashes.

"I really cannot imagine what any girl can want with lovers." These are the words in which she sums up the result of her day's experience before she falls into the dreamless sleep of youth, innocence, and a good deal of fatigue.

CHAPTER XII.

“SWEETHEART, IT IS—‘YES.’”

“Love is not to be bought—’tis of the soul,
The noblest element, the spirit bond
That links the angel with humanity.
As well mightest thou attempt to purchase heaven,
To vend the stars, make traffic of the skies,
Or measure out what is unmeasurable.”

SWAIN.

BY some feminine device, Jack is disposed of, it is to be assumed, for he is to be seen the next morning slowly promenading under the shady avenue beside a willowy Miss Cordelia Thornton, who is one of Maude Meredith’s bosom friends, and who looks up at the stalwart young agriculturist with that *intense* expression of the eyes that

has become so fashionable of late. Not having a sufficient stock of good looks in hand to pass for a "beauty," she has set up for an enchantress, with languishing glances and melodious tones. But Jack is pre-occupied, and her coquetries are completely wasted upon him. He answers her at random, for he is a thorough ignoramus in that social training which enables a man to smile and jest while his heart is aching. And it cannot be denied that poor Jack's good honest heart is aching very much just now as he thinks of Val—his beautiful, sparkling Val, his love of boyhood and manhood—wandering through shadow-dappled walks with that superb Adonis, Ainsworth Harcourt.

Val, meanwhile, is chattering to the Adonis in her light, careless way. If she *feels* anything for him, *au fond*, beyond considering him the handsomest man and the

best dancer of her acquaintance, surely the feeling does not appear. She hardly looks up at him, even, and when she does, there is more laughter than passion in her eyes.

"You cannot imagine how deeply I am in disgrace with everybody since my gipsying yesterday. Papa is as rigid as the North Pole; Mrs. Lyster is as cross as two sticks; Miss Meredith ignores me so completely that I almost feel as if I didn't exist; Jack is injured and wretched, and Mr. Fairfax is —nowhere."

Ainsworth Harcourt smiles.

"What a graphic description you have drawn of your party!" he says. "It is fortunate that you have managed to escape from them all for a little while. But you must have been doing something very indiscreet to bring about such a lamentable state of affairs. It must be surely something

more serious than a mere 'outing' to have created such wrath."

Val has no inclination to discuss this subject.

"People have often a propensity to make mountains out of very small mole-hills, you know—for want of something better to do, I suppose," she remarks, evasively. "After all, I must confess that this is not only a very disagreeable but a very unsatisfactory world altogether."

"You have changed your opinion of it, then, very suddenly and very completely. Only the other day—just a few weeks ago—you told me what a delightful place you considered it."

"The other day, just a few weeks ago," she answers, mocking him, "everybody was in a good humour and civil to me; and besides, several embarrassing things had not occurred."

He looks at her keenly.

"What kind of embarrassing things, might I ask?" he questions, point-blank. "Has Fairfax been making love to you while pretending to draw your face, or has the arrival of your friend and adorer, Mr. Jack, disturbed the tenor of your numerous flirtations?"

"You are exceedingly impertinent," she flashes out, reddening with anger. "I cannot think what manner of right you have to put such questions to me."

"I will tell you in a minute," he replies coolly and quietly, for they are now in the Artist's Walk. "Let us find the seat on which we sat *that first day*—do you remember?" and he speaks and looks very softly.

"I remember that we sat somewhere," she says, nonchalantly, not moved a whit by either his glances or his voice, "but I cer-

tainly have not the least recollection of the exact seat."

"See how much better my memory is than yours!" he murmurs plaintively.

Val is still chafed in temper, so she does not even turn her face towards him at these words, and the two proceed in silence for a minute or two. Mr. Harcourt, however, looks down at her, and notices what full beauty she is in, for anger lends a deeper colour to her pearly skin, and her eyes glitter like stars. The very toilette she wears, some soft, clinging material, of a creamy tint, relieved by knots of bright rose at the little white throat, and the dimpled wrists, and a light straw hat, drooping over her brow, add to her attractions. Ainsworth Harcourt is particular on the subject of feminine attire, and understands the various details of it almost as well a man-milliner.

Now, as he examines her critically, with an artistic eye, a very comfortable and complacent feeling comes over him that the field is all his own, that the prize is worth winning, and that there is no necessity for haste.

While he so reflects, Val evolves in her mind where Keith Fairfax is this morning, and why he has not even put in an appearance at breakfast. Thus, well united in sympathy, the two saunter along, until they find—or rather *he* finds—the seat on which they had their *tête-à-tête* that *first day*. Luckily it is unoccupied, and they establish themselves on it forthwith. As they do so, a few white fleecy cloudlets chase one another, passing over the broad face of the sun, and Val looks apprehensively upwards.

“Don’t you think there is danger of a heavy shower coming on?” she asks.

“Not the very least danger in the world,”

answers Mr. Harcourt, in the flat, positive tone of one who has absolute and undisputed control over the elements. "Never mind about the weather, Val, but look at me with those lovely eyes of yours, while I speak to you very seriously."

"I have no objection to looking at you as long as you please, Mr. Harcourt," the girl answers, turning the lovely eyes in question rather haughtily on him, "but I should very much prefer you to call me 'Miss Egerton.' Only my most intimate friends address me as 'Val!'"

A dark red flush sweeps over Ainsworth Harcourt's blond face. Never in the whole course of a long and varied career of flirtation has he received such an unpleasant, such a very direct rebuff as this. It certainly astonishes him, and makes him feel that perhaps he is going too fast. Such rapid running is not, as a rule, so insinuat-

ing to the fair sex as the quieter and more covered modes of attack; yet, for all his mortification and astonishment, his injured *amour propre*, he likes this "Rosebud set with little wilful thorns," twice as much for asserting her small self. His discomfiture is therefore not of long duration. With men of his calibre, the bump of sensitiveness is not prominent, and shyness is not chronic, although assurance is. Before a very few seconds have winged their flight, Richard is himself again, calm and cool, smiling and subtle.

"If I called you 'Val,'" he murmurs, sinking his voice to the most harmonious and perilously tender key which she has heard yet, "it is because I have ventured to hope that I might become one, nay, more than one, of your dearest and most intimate friends."

"You could not very conveniently become

two, could you?" she asks, with flippancy sarcasm, "although I know that you consider yourself a host."

He completely ignores her irony. It is not likely that a little miss in her teens is going to move him out of his imperturbable complacency by childish attempts at sauciness; so he treats her little stab as he would the puny sting of a gnat.

"I should like to be *the* most intimate friend in the world to you," he replies, *sotto voce*, bending closely towards her and taking possession of the hand that is toying with the ivory ring of her parasol.

She reclaims her hand very decidedly, and retreats involuntarily to the extreme end of the seat. She begins to feel slightly uncomfortable, but fortifies herself with the reflection that if the man is "trying to make a fool of her," as Mrs. Lyster prognosticated, at any rate two people could play at that same game.

"That is a remarkably modest desire on your part at least," she replies lightly, and yet with an expression of satire in her voice; "but I believe it is an accepted rule—in everything but politics—that before one aspires to a position of honour or trust one should display some sort of fitness for it. Now, I don't mean to be at all uncomplimentary, but can you show any just cause or reason *why* I should make you my most intimate friend in all the world?"

"Yes; I can show one very potent reason, and, I think, an all-sufficient one," answers this boldest of wooers, whom her manner begins to pique and puzzle slightly—" *I love you!*"

He brings out this important announcement of his sentiments in an inflated tone which, unconsciously to himself, betrays how deeply he feels his own magnanimity in uttering it.

Of course there are many foolish virgins

who would be deaf to this tone, blind to the overweening vanity of the speaker, alive only to the remarkable and undeniable physical attractions of the man.

And there are many women, who have reached mature years, and who are philosophically accustomed to the intense conceit inherent in the masculine bosom, who would not heed Mr. Harcourt's accents, even if they noticed them.

But Val is not of these.

She both hears and heeds, the pink flush glows deeper on her cheeks, and she turns two tawny eyes full upon him with a good deal of mockery in their depths.

"I am exceedingly obliged to you," she says quietly, with not a vestige of embarrassment or flutter; "but you must really pardon me if I differ with you in thinking your reason an all-sufficient one. If it were so, one or two other men would also

have the right to be my most intimate of friends, and I might find it both difficult and perplexing to reconcile the exclusive claims of all of you."

"I don't doubt that there are other men who love you—not one or two, but a score," he answers, conscious of an intense surprise at the singular obtuseness she displays to the unprecedented honour he is doing her; "but it is quite impossible that any of them can love you to the extent that I do."

"Why quite impossible?" she demands coolly. "Each one *says* exactly that. Each one affirms that he loves me best. How am I to tell whose affection is the greatest? There are no scales in which we can weigh love."

"Yes, but there are plenty of tests to which you can put it," he affirms. He is piqued, amused, vexed, and interested all at once. He feels that her charming, petu-

lant defiance gives a spicy flavour to this matter which it might otherwise lack. She is delicious in her offhand treatment of him, yet he is impatient for this sword-play to end, and for the sweet red lips to confess that he is conqueror.

But this Miss Egerton does not dream of acknowledging.

"What kind of tests?" she asks, demurely. "You see, such bits of information may come in useful at any time."

"Disinterestedness for one," he answers proudly. "You may be pretty well sure that a man really loves you when he is willing—nay, glad to resign possible or probable advantages for your sake."

"May I?" she murmurs half dreamily. Her eyes droop meditatively, her lips stir in their faint, baby smile, and the curves round the mouth soften visibly. Ainsworth Harcourt believes she is going to yield.

Instead of this, she is mentally reckoning up the possible or probable advantages which Keith Fairfax has resigned, or is about to resign, for her sweet sake."

"I do not wish to speak of myself," her companion goes on, after a momentary silence, "but it is likely that you may have heard some things about me that may cause you to hesitate in accepting my love at once. I have any number of kind friends here ready to tell you that I am a flirt, and—" he turns a little red—"a fortune-hunter."

"True," she says, in her usual candid way. "I have certainly heard your friends call you both."

"Perhaps in a measure they were right enough. I *have* flirted desperately in my life. Every man who has never felt a strong, exclusive attachment flirts, and I did make up my mind that I could not afford to marry any woman who was not heavily gilded.

Worse looking men have sold themselves at very high prices, you know! So late even as yesterday I thought all this. Yesterday I should not have dared to confess to you how I love you—for yesterday I could not have asked you to marry me—to-day I can."

"Indeed!"

And Val averts her head a little to hide the smile which the grandiloquence of these last words evokes. Yet she is interested to a certain extent, for here is another "heart history." As she glances covertly at her suitor, she is forced to own to herself that he begins to look more like a man, and a man who is in earnest, than she has ever seen him look before.

"Twenty-four hours must have worked a tremendous change in some way, either in yourself or in your affairs," she remarks, as she amuses herself by punching little holes

in the ground with the knob of her parasol.

"The change is not in myself, but in my affairs. It seems very strange! It is so seldom in a man's life that a good gift comes *just* in time. Fortune is usually so hard and so contrary. Do you remember last night, when you and I were sitting together in the corridor, and Mrs. Lyster came up to us?"

Val bends her head in assent. She remembers it perfectly, vividly rise up before her—Mrs. Lyster's sardonic smile, Keith's vexed, hurt face.

"Just then, as you felt, perhaps, I had almost told you how desperately I loved you—the words were burning on my lips, but I kept them back, feeling that I had no right to utter them. I had nothing to fall back on save that love of mine, and I could not selfishly wish you to share poverty with me—you so bright and so beautiful as you

are! But oh! if you knew how galling was the chain of circumstances that tied my tongue! I kept silence by a gigantic effort, and took you back into the ball-room, feeling half inclined to leave by the first morning train, for fear of making a fool of myself. Outside the grand *salle*—probably you remember it?—a man spoke to me. He was a man whom I fancied miles away in Australia, a man whom I had known well, and whom I had trusted deeply with what in these days one least likes to trust—money. Eighteen months ago he talked to me in such glowing terms of certain speculations in which he was engaged, that I, like a fool, as everyone who knew of the matter thought, gave him half of my small capital to invest. When I saw him last night, my heart sank. ‘He has come to tell me he has failed,’ I said to myself. I put you in a chair, and went back to him. Instead of

having failed, he came to tell me that the speculation had succeeded far beyond his best hopes, and that we—he and I—are now moderately independent, and may be rich men.”

“I am so very glad,” cries Val, heartily, turning towards him fully, and shaking both his hands with energy. “I thank you very much for letting me be the first to congratulate you.”

She says this eagerly, cordially, and for a moment entirely forgets the reason why he has told her this story. It is recalled to her recollection, however, when he leans forward and catches hold of her hand once more, looking at her the while with those limpid ultramarine eyes of his, in which so many women’s hearts have tumbled un-awares.

“You cannot doubt any longer that I love you,” he pleads, passionately, “now

that you see the first use I make of the new freedom that has come to me, now that I ask you to share with me all the wealth that Fortune may send. Val, you *will* do it, will you not?"

She does not rebuke him this time for calling her "Val." Perhaps she scarcely heeds that he does so. The moment of triumph has come now in earnest, and she would be, more than the spoilt, impulsive, pleasure-loving girl that has been painted here, if she did not hesitate before she rejects this offer.

Here is not exactly the duke or prince in disguise she had pictured sitting on the swing at Fernlee that midsummer starlit night, but he is the next best thing to them—a wealthy, handsome gentleman. She is really bound in honour to nobody—not even the gleaming symbol on her finger is a real tie. She is at liberty to accept this

man if she will, and to consider all he has to offer her.

Himself to begin with !

Himself, over whom scores of her sex have broken their hearts even while he was an "ineligible," a man whose wonderful beauty makes him a very king among men, whose manner and style are irreproachable. Add to all this a fine old English name, and the money, which she has learned already is the true "sesame" that opens the doors to pleasure and success.

She goes rapidly through all these considerations. She fancies herself the "beautiful Mrs. Harcourt." In Tophet, which has already received her with cordiality, she can believe how many will envy her, and how she will be able to pay back—Maude Meredith in particular—to the uttermost farthing, for each patronizing slight she has suffered. It is a bright and tempting pic-

ture, and he who wonders that she hesitates over it, that she cannot at once fathom its falsity and hollowness, and turn her face steadily away from it, has very little knowledge of the world, and very little idea how few women in this girl's position would hesitate at all. The lover, who watches her, naturally enough attributes her long silence to that maidenly shyness which occasionally ties women's tongues, and he bends forward again, until his long golden moustache almost touches her cheek.

"Sweetheart," he whispers, "it is '*Yes?*'"

"No!" answers Val, starting back, and in terror lest some one coming round the curve of the path should detect them in this unequivocally sentimental position. "At least I mean that I—you must give me time to reflect—one can't make up one's mind in a minute," she winds up hastily.

"But you have known me over six

weeks," he expostulates, in a tone which seems to say that he cannot possibly comprehend how any woman could know him for six hours and not jump at the prospect of marrying him.

"Yes, but I have known some other people longer than six weeks," says Val; "and then you must remember that during these six weeks I have not had the slightest anticipation of this. So naturally I am quite unprepared for it. Everybody told me that you were only amusing yourself, so I saw no harm in amusing myself, and I certainly had no idea of letting you break my heart and turn my head for sheer pastime." He draws himself up with a slight air of offended dignity.

"You are very kind to tell me that you have only been amusing yourself, while *I* have been in earnest—most sober earnest!"

"Well, you know what children say,

‘Turn about is fair play,’” she laughs. “By all accounts, you have amused yourself often enough, not to grudge some one else the same diversion.”

So the matter is left for the nonce, and having pledged herself to give a definite answer as soon as possible, Val proposes returning to the chalet.

“Mrs. Lyster told me at breakfast that she wanted to speak to me,” she says, with a grimace, “after Plant.”—“And then Lisette wants to try on my dress for the fancy ball. Do you know that I am really going as ‘My Lady Coquette?’ What are you going as.”

“Nothing,” he replies sulkily. “I look upon such things as ridiculous bores, and I do wish that you would not think of going in a character suggested by Fairfax.”

They are walking along, and she turns round to stare at him in unfeigned surprise.

“And pray why not?”

“Because I don’t like it!—because I feel as if you belonged to me, and I don’t like the character, in the first place, and Fairfax in the second.”

“But I *don’t* belong to you,” she blurts out positively. “Your feelings make a great mistake, if they tell you that I do!”

“They tell me that you *will* belong to me, however.”

“Ah! they had better not be too sure of that. A wise man does not boast himself of the morrow, you know!”

CHAPTER XIII.

“MEN ARE SUCH FOOLS !”

“And yet believe me, good as well as ill,
Woman’s at best a contradiction still.”

POPE.

VAL finds Lisette in a fever of impatience to try on the costume of “My Lady Coquette.” It is of old-fashioned gold-coloured brocade, a material which Mrs. Lyster decided to be the most suitable thing available at such short notice, and with which the energetic Frenchwoman’s skilful fingers have accomplished a marvellous result. While it is being fitted in Mrs. Lyster’s own room, she looks on, gives manifold direc-

tions, suggests decided improvements, and finally, when the important operation is over, orders Lisette off, and requests Val to "sit down, if she has a few minutes to spare."

This last she says in her ordinary caustic way, adding, with the mocking smile that seems as if it positively *grew* on her lips,

"I have not the slightest doubt that you want to go and divert yourself with your admirers, but they can wait while I speak to you. What is this that Keith told me last night? Is he really mad enough to desire to marry *you*, and are you going to be mad enough to marry *him*, and ruin all his prospects and your own in life?"

This is not by any means a pleasant or propitiatory form of address, as Val feels, and filled with a consciousness of the magnificent proposal which has but within the hour been made her, it is not at all surpris-

ing that she draws herself up to her full height of five feet three inches, and throws her head back with the haughtiness of an Eastern princess.

"I don't know what Mr. Fairfax may have told you, Mrs. Lyster, but the first of your questions is easily answered. Your nephew did me the honour yesterday of asking me to marry him, but I did not give him any definite reply, nor have I yet decided what my reply will be!"

"Hoity-toity!" then Mrs. Lyster stops. This is her favourite expression when she is amused, surprised, or anxious to show a crushing contempt. On a particular occasion like the present, it is equivalent to a whole chapter of meaning, without words. Val changes colour, she scarcely knows why, when the sarcastic tones fall on her ear. Instinctively she becomes aware that the cynical old woman is imputing to her

motives which she would scorn to possess.

“Men are such fools—*such* fools!” remarks that amiable person; “but of all fools, Keith Fairfax, although he *is* my nephew, and comes of a family with brains, is the greatest. He could not be content with one woman having played fast and loose with his feelings, and then thrown him aside like a worthless old shoe, but he is anxious to give another an opportunity to do the same! Bah! I wonder when he will have the sense to learn that no girl, who can do better for herself, ever marries a pauper now-a-days. The time of disinterested love and unselfish sacrifice, womanly devotion, and so forth, is gone by. Such things are as old as Mount Horeb, and it is very fortunate that we *don't* hear of them in the nineteenth century, or there wouldn't be half enough of foundling hospitals, and

infant asylums, and homes for wandering minstrels, and institutions of the kind, ready for the results of such insane matches. I dare say, my dear, that you have waited before giving Keith your reply, to learn what his prospects are, and very sensible, *very* sensible indeed it was of you too. Well!"

Mrs. Lyster pauses to take breath after her long speech, which, in her excitement has been a little disconnected and peculiar; then she shoots a keen glance at the bit of a creature who sits opposite to her perfectly cool and placid, and apparently not a whit interested in the subject in question. And yet Val's heart (which, by-the-by, is a great contradiction) is bumping and thumping beneath her cream-coloured bodice, and her feelings are certainly not enviable. It is not agreeable, to use the mildest term, when the most sordid motives are attributed

to one, and one is accredited with thoughts and sentiments such as one would blush to confess even to oneself.

“ Well, my dear, Keith Fairfax’s prospects are simply not worth considering. He has, I believe, somewhere about four hundred a year, and he paints pictures, and expects to sell them ; that is absolutely all. I have told him—and he knows very well that I always stick to what I say—that unless he marries Maude I shall not leave him a penny. I am expected to provide for Maude, who is an orphan, and it is by her marriage with Keith that I can do so most conveniently to myself. As for his not caring about her—pouf ! who thinks about that ? He will probably go his way, she will go her way ; both may go the wrong way, but I shall have done my duty towards them, and that is all that concerns me. Now I am sure you have far too clear

an idea of the fortune and position which your face ought to win for you, than to throw yourself away in such a manner as this."

"Mr. Fairfax told me that he would be a poor and struggling man," says Val, her eyes wandering over to a large mirror opposite, which gives back line for line and tint for tint her *piquante* beauty.

"Yes, he will be that," eagerly replies Mrs. Lyster. "He will be a poor, struggling *artist*. Can you imagine anything more dreadful than that? If a man be poor, let him be poor—let him work or dig or beg and not be ashamed; but poverty with a gloss on it, poverty full of shams—a picturesque vagabondage must be ten times more trying than any other station in life to which Providence sees fit to call you."

"I do not quite agree in that," murmurs the girl, as she pictures a studio in some

romantic, and, to her, unknown suburb like Fulham or Brompton—a studio in all the elegance of artistic confusion, half finished sketches, busts, easels, palettes, brushes, all *pêle-mêle*—Keith Fairfax himself, with his head of clustering brown curls thrown back, his athlete figure in a charming pose, attired in the usual attire of artists (in pictures), of black velvet, with the ever low Shakspearean collar displaying a good deal of very white throat; Keith's dark grey eyes kindling and his cheek flushing as he surveys a beautiful half completed portrait—*her* portrait, perhaps. But her imagination is cut short.

“You do not agree with me!” Mrs. Lyster cries sharply and harshly; “why, even if you loved him—by which I mean if you had for him the sickly, sentimental fancy that silly little girls and silly little boys get up for each other—it would not only be selfish, but infamously wicked of you to tie

him down to such a fate. But you *don't* love him ; and therefore let me pray of you to tell him so, and put an end to this absurd matter."

"Do you think I don't love him?" says Val, reflectively. "I wonder how you can tell?"

Mrs. Lyster eyes her steadily, her brows knitting, for she suspects irony.

"I can tell, young lady," she answers austerely, "because I don't think it is in you to love anything more than your own pretty baby face, and the admiration it wins."

The pretty baby face of which she speaks looks back at her quietly, without a sign of vexation ruffling its fair surface.

"You may be right," says its owner. "Really I don't know. I wish I did. No doubt I am very mercenary—very worldly ; but still——"

She pauses an instant, then goes on abruptly—

“Mrs. Lyster, will you be good enough to tell me whether or not your nephew clearly understood last night that you would do nothing more for him if he still persisted in wishing to marry me?”

“Yes, he understood perfectly. He would be thicker-headed than I give him credit for if he did not, for I left no single loop-hole of doubt on the subject.”

“And when he understood it, what did he say?”

“He was an obstinate fool,” the old lady replies, quite reckless of elegancies of language in her fast-rising wrath, while she recollects her conversation with her refractory relative. “I have told you already that he was an obstinate fool—a madman, ready—indeed, determined—to give up his future, his fortune, and *me*—do you hear

that?—for the sake of a girl who does not care a fig about him, but whose face has bewitched him!”

“Ah!” says the girl in question—and though “ah!” is a common enough interjection, it contains a volume in this moment. Mr. Harcourt’s words about a test for love come back to her—“You may be sure that a man really loves you when he is willing to resign all possible or probable advantages for your sake.” “What advantages has Ainsworth Harcourt resigned?” she asks herself. “He certainly would never have asked me to marry him if he had remained a poor man—” and yet—and yet Val doesn’t want to be poor—she wants—*longs* to be rich!

On these contradictory feelings, Mrs. Lyster’s voice suddenly breaks.

“I am a fool, too,” she says, “or I would let him go his own ungrateful way,

without holding out a hand to save him. I cannot help making an effort, however. Somehow Keith is dearer to me than anyone else. If I have read you aright, my dear—and I think I have—you are not so very difficult to read, you know, especially to an old woman like me, who understands most things—you love the world and its pomps and vanities, its admiration and its pleasures, the flesh and the devil, as well as it is possible for anyone to love¹ them. I have pointed out to you that you will effectually shut the door on all these nice things if you persist in marrying Keith Fairfax. But it does not of necessity follow that because you do *not* marry him, you should accept that young giant Rivers, and bury all your beauty and spirit among the pigs and poultry and mangolds of an out-of-the-way Devonshire farm. Reject both these men, and come with me. I will easily per-

suade your father to give you over to my care—poor man, he is nothing but a phial of physic enveloped in a ball of flannel, and has no powers of resistance, for he lacks backbone terribly—terribly, my dear. How your mother can go hand-in-hand with him through the pilgrimage of this vale of tears, is more than my philosophy dreams of. However, of course that is *her* look out, and not mine. I was going to say that I would introduce you into the first and best circles of society in France and Italy, and promise that within a year you shall make a brilliant marriage. We'll go where princes of the royal blood are as plentiful as the blackberries in your native lanes, and where bank-notes are mere waste-paper!"

An alluring invitation, truly; but as Mrs. Lyster holds forth the temptations which she believes will be too much for

the little russet-brown head to withstand, she is surprised as well as indignant at the little impression her glittering offers make.

"You are very kind," Miss Egerton remarks. She says the words almost mechanically, as she gazes at the eager, unlovely countenance before her, and at the wrinkled hands, sparkling with diamonds and other precious stones, that are crossed over the top of her crutch.

How poorly, how *horribly* meanly, this shrewd old woman of the world must rate her, when she can venture to make such a proposition as this. There is a dreadful sordidness about it, a suggestion of a bribe, a mercenary arrangement, which removes it far out of the region even of a temptation, and Val's voice is as cold as ice as she reiterates again—

"You are very kind, but with many thanks for your offer, I am happy to say

that there is no occasion for me to trouble you. If I wish to make a good match, I can, I believe, do so at once. Mr. Harcourt heard last night of a fortune which has come to him through a lucky speculation, and this morning he has been good enough to ask me to marry him."

The crutch drops from Mrs. Lyster's hand with a clanging noise to the floor; she sits erect, as if petrified, with a stony stare at the speaker. Never, in the course of her long life, has she been more completely amazed.

"Ainsworth Harcourt!" she exclaims, when Val has picked up the crutch and replaced it in her grasp. "Are you in earnest? Do you seriously mean me to believe that *Ainsworth Harcourt* has asked *you* to marry him?"

"I should hardly dream of jesting on such a subject," answers Val, with newborn

dignity. "Mr. Harcourt has undoubtedly asked me to marry him."

"I really think the whole world is going mad! What on earth is there in you besides a pink and white face for men to make such fools of themselves about? But, at least, it puts an end to my anxiety about Keith. Of *course* you are engaged to the other?"

"No, I am not. I did not give *him* a definite answer either."

"Upon my word, I don't think there's a doubt but that *you* are mad. What *do* you expect, I should like to know? Let me tell you that there are dozens—nay, hundreds of women in the world who would only be too glad to accept Ainsworth Harcourt as a husband without a *sou* in his pocket. His face in itself is a temptation they cannot resist."

"I don't quite know what I *do* expect," Val observes wearily, with a genuine sigh.

"But any of the women who want Mr. Harcourt are very welcome to him, as far as *I* am concerned."

"If Mademoiselle pleases, the young Monsieur Rivers is in the *salon*, and would wish to speak to her," Lisette announces, putting in her daintily-capped head within the door.

Mademoiselle rises with alacrity. She is not particularly anxious to see the "young Monsieur Rivers," but she feels that anything will be a relief after this *tête-à-tête* with Mrs. Lyster. The latter looks after her retreating figure with a bitter smile.

"You may tell the marines that Ainsworth Harcourt has asked you to marry him, and that you are hesitating over his proposal," she mutters, half audibly, nodding her head with its enormous friz of curls, like a wicked old fairy. "What is the world coming to, I wonder?"

‘ Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon,
The little dog laughed to see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.’

That's about the order of things now-a-days.
No, no, Miss Egerton. If Ainsworth Harcourt *has* asked you, you will marry him as sure as two and two make four in this enlightened age; if he has *not*, then I suppose it is certain to be a toss up between Keith and that young Goliath. Men *are* such fools—*such* fools !”

CHAPTER XIV.

EMBARRAS DES RICHESSES.

“Love! oh, young love!

Why hast thou not security? Thou art
Like to a bright river on whose course the weeds
Are thick and heavy, briers are on its banks.”

L. E. L.

VAL soon discovers that having three or four lovers on hand is far from a pleasant existence; it is an *embarras des richesses* which, to say the least, is more perplexing than profitable.

“Admirers,” Val considers within herself to be quite a different order of beings from “lovers.”

Admirers have no right to be exacting or jealous, and are easily brought to a knowledge of their proper level if they presume in any way; but a declared lover feels that he *has* a right, simply by the fact of that very declaration of his, to make himself disagreeable, and he exercises the right, as a rule.

As long as the world goes round, men and women will never learn that love is seldom won by woe-begone looks and jealous exactions. In this particular instance of which I write, the woe-begone looks are contributed by Jack, the jealous exactions by Ainsworth Harcourt. The first keeps Val in a wretchedly remorseful and conscience-stricken frame of mind, the last in a chronic condition of indignant revolt.

With regard to Keith Fairfax, she is, moreover, in a state of strange uncertainty

which is decidedly not conducive to serenity of temper.

There can be no shadow of doubt but that he clearly and distinctly avoids her. Ever since her interview with Mrs. Lyster, a barrier of alienation and constraint has arisen between her and Keith which she in vain endeavours to scale. He makes no claims whatever on her time or attention; let her ride, drive, walk, or flirt with whom she will and as long as she will, he simply looks on with an impassive face and says nothing. He does not, in fact, seem to *see* her even at times; she is invariably escorted to and from the chalet by Ainsworth Harcourt or Jack, whose claims she has considerable trouble in balancing equally, and save a few common-places exchanged at the breakfast or dinner-table, Keith might be an utter stranger to her.

Now Val's character has been drawn to

very little purpose indeed, if anyone thinks that such a condition of affairs is pleasant, or even supportable to her. No woman, short of a saint, likes to lose a lover, and Val has already declared the manifest enough fact that she is not anywhere near the reign of evangelical perfection. She is dreadfully piqued and puzzled by Keith's desertion, and, as a natural consequence, thinks far more of him than of her secure and persevering slaves. She sets her little white teeth hard as she looks now and then covertly at Mrs. Lyster.

"*You* have been making mischief!" she thinks. "*You* have been telling him that I mean to marry Ainsworth Harcourt; I may, or I may not, but, all the same, you had no right to tell him so, and he has no right to treat me like this—like this!" the last words burst from her almost in a sob, but she gulps back the tears for fear they

should well up in her eyes, while her heart is exceedingly sore.

So matters go on unsatisfactorily enough, until the day of the fancy ball, which is to be the crowning event of the season.

Looking back on these days, afterwards they would probably seem to Val as though enveloped in a great mist of trouble and uncertainty. Yet none can say that she loses spirit in the whirl of gaiety which is going on. Everything that is to be done she does—dances, promenades, talks nonsense, dresses to perfection, and is admired and envied to her heart's content. But through it all, the refrain of her thoughts is after the fashion of Toole—

“And still I am not 'appy.”

Those who know Spa will readily understand how Mr. Harcourt's altered finances are canvassed. Men grudge him his unprecedented luck, women gush over “*ce cher*

Harcourt," to whom the gods have been so beneficent in beauty and Dame Fortune so kind, and it is not surprising that the girl, at whose feet he desires to place himself and his money, finds herself on the pinnacle of notoriety. Since Mrs. Lyster circulated the fact of his proposal, it has become the topic of the hour. A romance in real life, people call it with startling sentimentality.

But it must be confessed that the heroine of the romance feels the fierce glare that beats upon her eminence as rather oppressive, although there can be no doubt but that, after a way, she enjoys the *éclat* of the position ; and poor Jack, looking mournfully on, is fully conscious that his hopes of a future home in Arcadia, with the loveliest of Phillises, is growing "small by degrees and beautifully less."

Why on earth did he come? he asks himself in a hypochondriacal manner, again

and again, finding no answer or reason save in the unutterable sweetness of the big black eyes which are always full of the old frank, friendly affection whenever they turn upon him.

There is one person to whom Val's success at this time is naturally gall and wormwood, and that person, of course, is Maude Meredith. Her vanity was immensely wounded when Mrs. Lyster told her of the sacrifice Keith Fairfax was willing to make for the fair pink and white face; but deeper, a thousand times deeper than her vanity—and it must be deep indeed—the pang of Ainsworth Harcourt's treachery and falsity strikes.

She knows full well that friends are pitying her, and foes are smiling over her disappointment, and the disappointment itself is quite keen enough to bring hot tears

(which nobody sees) to her pale haughty eyes.

For it is even so—that in Vanity Fair, where hearts should be tough and hardened, and “feeling” a thing both obsolete and vulgar, pangs are suffered and bitter tears shed of which the outer world is ignorant. Women of Maude Meredith’s mould have, with all their manifold and contemptible faults, a martyr’s invincible courage and a soldier’s indomitable pride. With them, indeed, “the heart knoweth its own bitterness,” and the heart alone.

On this much longed for, much talked of day of the fancy ball, the battledore and shuttlecock of conversation lags wearily on its course round the dinner-table at the châtelet. The soup and fish, the *entrées* and *entremets* are partaken of in a grim and almost sepulchral silence; and even the wine and melons and nuts fail to produce any

hilarity or geniality amongst the company. In fact, for several days sociability has been scarce with the party, and when they talk at all it is merely to exchange a few uninteresting platitudes regarding the weather or the new arrivals, to criticise the belles already well-known at Spa, or to indulge in a little vague gossip.

To-day—by a stroke of good fortune, or able diplomacy, as he thinks—Jack has obtained a seat at the table, and shares in this remarkable feast of reason and flow of soul.

He and Val chatter a little *sotto voce*, and Mrs. Lyster favours the philosopher with a few of her caustic remarks regarding his “wraps,” a subject that should be threadbare by this time; but living by rule, and reflecting deeply before he partakes of any dish that is offered him, Mr. Egerton is too much occupied with his gastronomical re-

searches to answer her or argue with her.

Maude Meredith, with her cold supercilious countenance, entirely ignores all that is said around in a manner which, if it does not succeed in crushing everybody, ought to do so. And Keith Fairfax, though especially free from the sin of gluttony, devotes himself entirely to his food, and says nothing to man or woman.

To him, nevertheless, Val turns after a while, flushing slightly as she does so.

"I suppose you know that I am going to the ball in your character—that is, in the character which you suggested," she stammers, a little timidly. "Do you feel any curiosity as to how I shall look it?"

"I have not the slightest doubt in the world but that you will look it, as you look everything—most exceedingly well," he answers, with that excessively frigid polite-

ness which of all things is the most discouraging.

"Oh, you are kind," she says, bowing to him in mock gratitude, and with a smile on her lip, but tears of mortification in her eyes, which she lowers her lids to hide. Then she faces Jack with a forced laugh. "Is it not amiable of Mr. Fairfax to say that I look everything so well!"

"You forget, my dear," Mrs. Lyster remarks (she has that universal feminine failing of putting her fingers into everyone's pie), "that Keith thinks the character he suggested so well suited to you! What is that about being such an unthrift of sweets and so like the wind that kisses everything it meets? I am not so apt in remembering poetry as I was when young and beautiful like yourself," she adds benignly.

Upon this Jack, who is slightly rustic

perhaps, and not well up in facial control, has considerable difficulty in hiding his amusement as he glances up at the huge bunch of frizzed hair, the small colourless eyes, and the *prononcé* hook of the lady who, in bygone days, was also a Thing of Beauty. But he meets with no sympathy in his mirth from his old playmate, who is completely engrossed in her own thoughts and feelings.

“Of course it was only the malice of some jealous man who wrote that about the coquette,” she observes gravely. “If he had *loved* her instead of being jealous of her, he would have liked to see her admired, and liked her to enjoy the admiration; but men are so horribly selfish always!”

They are almost a counterpart of the words which Mrs. Middleton uttered a few days before, and Keith, recollecting them, looks at Val with eyes which she feels instinctively to be keen and yet very wistful.

Is Mrs. Lyster right?—Are all women alike? he wonders to himself. Is there the making of another Gertrude Heneage in this girl—nay, child, fresh from the conventional seclusion of a quiet, out-of-the-way country home?

These are questions which he asks himself, a little sorrowfully, perhaps, and with a vague sense of disappointment at his heart; and as he considers whether he is not unjustly condemning her, Val's bright eyes suddenly meet his, and she leans forward, and speaks shyly in a very low voice,

"Since you suggested the character, you ought to have the very first sight of the costume, I think. If you care for it, you might come down to the chalet and fetch me to-night; if you *don't* care, it doesn't matter at all—Jack is always ready and willing for escort duty, and so is Mr. Harcourt."

Oh, short-sighted folly of woman, and

shorter-sighted blindness, deafness, and general stupidity of man ! In the first part of poor little Val's sentence there is a gentle winningness and a gracious invitation, which the man who loves her would scarcely be able to resist. In the latter part there is a quick defiance, a haughty impatience, a galling vanity. Mr. Fairfax, his sex all over, heeds the last and wholly overlooks the first.

"I am sorry," he answers coldly, "but I fear I cannot have the pleasure of taking you over to the Rooms. I have promised Mrs. Middleton to escort her and Mrs. Trevor, General Trevor having gone to Brussels for a few days. I did not, of course, fancy that you would need my services, knowing how well you are provided with *cavalieri servi*." *venti*."

"You are quite right, I do not need your services in the very least," Val flashes out

impetuously, though inwardly she feels faint and sick, and wretched; and the moment the dessert is cleared off the table, she jumps up from her seat, inviting Jack to a short stroll under the trees, an invitation to which he joyfully accedes.

He does not find, however, as they saunter along, that his liege lady is as brisk and bright as usual, and presently he remarks on the fact.

"Yes," she says, "I am almost broken down; I have gone through an unlimited amount of exertion and survived it, but I feel that a little more of the same kind of thing would finish me as the last straw did the camel's back. If I don't get a short siesta by-and-by, I shall be fit for nothing to-night."

"You certainly take very little rest for a delicate little bird as you are," Jack murmurs tenderly, longing to hug her up to his

broad bosom, and to keep off with his big brawny arms any innovators on her quietude. "Somebody is for ever engrossing your attention, asking you to walk, or ride, or dance, or something. It is quite unaccountable to me how you manage at all, and how the lovely rose colour still keeps on your cheeks; but it *can't* keep long at this rate," he adds, with a regretful sigh.

"Never mind—there's heaps to be bought, you know," and she laughs at his horror-stricken face as he pictures to himself his sweet fresh darling painted and bedizened like a good many of the women he regards with almost unconcealable disgust at Spa.

"You could never think of *rouge*, Val," he says in a solemn voice, believing, poor honest young fellow, rouge to be a stepping-stone to sin and perdition, and only a bait of the devil.

"Why not? Why is putting on rouge or false hair a bit worse than putting on smiles when one's heart is aching?" Val asks, cynically.

Upon this Jack pauses in his walk, and faces her with wide-open, curious eyes.

"But *your* heart never aches, Val?"

"Why not? Why shouldn't it? Why should I be different from other people? And why should you suppose me to be exempt from heartaches, I should like to know?" she questions, impatiently. Then she marks his surprise, and colours up furiously. "But this is nonsense, of course—everyone knows I have nothing to make my heart ache—in fact, I ought to be the happiest creature alive. I am tired, that's all; but I must make hay while the sun shines," she goes on, wearily. "I shall have plenty of time to rest when I go home. There I shall have nothing to do but swing, read novels, ride Nell, or torment you."

"I wish to God the time was come, then," Jack cries, heartily. "But somehow I do not feel as if it would ever come again," he adds, gazing at her with two worshipping eyes. "Day by day I feel more and more what a fool I am, Val; day by day I grow more certain that you will never again be content at home. You will marry a rich man, like that fellow Harcourt, and you will live entirely in the world, and be gay and admired to your heart's content!"

"And pray," exclaims Val, "who ever said that I had a desire to be gay and admired, and—and to marry a rich man? Jack, you have no more sense and discernment than anybody else—not half as much as your own retrievers and setters. There is not one among you—no, not one, who really knows anything about me."

"Are you sure that you know anything about yourself?" he ventures to inquire,

fearing to evoke her anger. But no, to his surprise she looks at him gravely, but kindly, and answers,

“Yes, I think I do.”

The result of this knowledge she does not attempt to impart, however, but dismissing him at the steps of the chalet, she retires to her own room, ostensibly for a siesta.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.







